WAGING BROWN WATER WARFARE: THE MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE IN THE MEKONG DELTA, 1966-1969

by

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A THESIS

IN

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAR - After Action Report

ACTOV - Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese

AN - Net Laying Ship

AO - Area of Operations

APA - Attack Transport Ship

APB - Self-Propelled Barracks Ship

APL - Non-Self-Propelled Barracks Ship

ARL - Light Repair Ship

ARVN - Army of the Republic of Vietnam

ASPB - Assault Support Patrol Boat

ATC - Armored Troop Carrier

ATC(F) - Armored Troop Carrier (Flamethrower)

ATC(H) - Armored Troop Carrier (Hospital)

AWOL - Absent Without Leave

CCB - Command Communications Boat or Command and Control Boat

CG DMAC - Commanding General, Delta Military Assistance Command

CG IIFFV - Commanding General, II Field Force, Vietnam

CIDG - Civilian Irregular Defense Group

CINCPAC - Commander in Chief, Pacific

CINCPACFLT - Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet

CNO - Chief of Naval Operations

CO - Commanding Officer

COMNAVFORV - Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam

COMUSMACV - Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

COSVN - Central Office for South Vietnam

CTF - Commander, Task Force

CTG - Commander, Task Group

CTZ - Corps Tactical Zone

DENCAP - Dental Civic Action Program

DER - Radar-picket Destroyer Escort

Dinassauts - *Divisions navales d'assaut* (French naval assault divisions)

DMAC - Delta Military Assistance Command

DMZ - Demilitarized Zone

DRV - Democratic Republic of Vietnam

EOD - Explosive Ordnance Disposal

FSB - Fire Support Base

FSPB - Fire Support Pontoon Base

GVN - Government of Vietnam

ICP - Indochinese Communist Party

ID - Infantry Division

IFFV - I Field Force, Vietnam

IIFFV - II Field Force, Vietnam

IMEF - First Marine Expeditionary Force

JCS - Joint Chiefs of Staff

JGS - Joint General Staff

LCA - Landing Craft, Assault

LCI - Landing Craft, Infantry

LCM - Landing Craft, Medium

LCT - Landing Craft, Tank

LCU - Landing Craft, Utility

LCVP - Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel

LF - Local Force

LSIL - Landing Ship, Infantry, Large

LSSL - Landing Ship, Support, Large

LST - Landing Ship, Tank

MAAG - Military Assistance Advisory Group

MACV - Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

MEDCAP - Medical Civic Action Program

Medivac - Medical evacuation

MF - Main Force

MRB - Mobile Riverine Base

MRF - Mobile Riverine Force

MRG - Mobile Riverine Group

MSC - Minesweeper, Coastal

MSO - Minesweeper, Ocean

N-2 - Naval staff officer in charge of intelligence

NAG - Naval Advisory Group

NCO - Noncommissioned Officer

NDP - Night Defensive Position

NLF - National Liberation Front

NSAS - Naval Support Activity, Saigon

OPORD - Operations Order

PAVN - Peoples Army of Vietnam

PBR - Patrol Boat, River

PCF - Patrol Craft, Fast

PLAF - People's Liberation Armed Forces

PM - Provincial Mobile

POL - Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants

RAD - River Assault Division

RAG - River Assault Group

RARE - Riverine Armed Reconnaissance Element

RAS - River Assault Squadron

RF/PF - Regional Force / Provincial Force

RPG - Rocket Propelled Grenade

RSSZ - Rung Sat Special Zone

RVN - Republic of Vietnam

RVNAF - Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

S-2 - Army staff officer in charge of intelligence

S-5 - Army staff officer in charge of civil affairs

SEAL - Sea, Air and Land. US Navy special forces

SEALORDS - Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy

SLAR - Side Looking Aerial Radar

TAOR - Tactical Area of Responsibility

TF - Task Force

TG - Task Group

TOC - Tactical Operations Center

USN - United States Navy

VC - Viet Cong

VNMC - South Vietnamese Marine Corps

VNN - South Vietnamese Navy

VNNP - South Vietnamese National Police

VNQDD - *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*

WPB - United States Coast Guard Patrol Boat

YRBM - Repair, Berthing, and Messing Barge (nonself-propelled)

YTB - Harbor Tug, Large

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the long years of the Cold War, the United States pursued a policy of containing communism wherever it threatened free people. In the course of the global struggle against international communism, the United States made a commitment to defend a tiny outpost in Southeast Asia. Few Americans understood the prevailing circumstances in Vietnam, and fewer still comprehended the stakes. In the 1960s and early 1970s, however, millions of Americans would be called to defend South Vietnam, a country few had ever heard of and a people they did not know.

The American fighting forces in South Vietnam faced a host of challenges from an alien and hostile environment, and a lethal foe. From mountains and valleys containing triple-canopy jungles to flooded rice paddies, American fighting men engaged in battles and skirmishes throughout South Vietnam against a tough and determined enemy. No other landscape provided quite the same challenges to American soldiers and sailors as the rivers and canals, and the swamps and marshes of the Mekong delta in southern South Vietnam. In order to be successful militarily against a communist insurgency in the Mekong delta, the Americans initially employed riverine warfare techniques first developed and practiced by the French Navy, which preceded the Americans in Vietnam by over a decade. American fighting men then incorporated several tactical innovations and improvements that further developed the original French modes of operating on the rivers and canals of the delta. The challenging delta

environment demanded the Americans confront several adverse conditions. American soldiers and sailors eventually adjusted to the formidable environment and conducted a wide range of operations in the delta throughout the American involvement in Vietnam.

The United States military conceived the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF) and then eventually deployed it into the Mekong delta. The MRF was a marriage of one US Army infantry brigade and one specialized US Navy task force. Together, the two units plied the waterways of the Mekong delta searching for the elusive Viet Cong (VC) insurgents. In the process of engaging the enemy in the delta over two and one-half years, the MRF, due to its presence and mobility during the Tet Offensive of early 1968, prevented the Viet Cong guerrillas and their communist North Vietnamese allies from realizing their plans to create a general uprising in the delta.

In early 1968, at the time of the Lunar New Year, referred to in Vietnam as Tet, the armies of the North Vietnamese government launched a nationwide general offensive throughout South Vietnam designed to inspire the people to topple their government in Saigon. The northern leadership in Hanoi hoped the peasants in the Mekong delta, fortified by the battlefield successes of the Viet Cong and of the Peoples Army of (North) Vietnam (PAVN), would overthrow the Saigon government during a general uprising throughout South Vietnam, thus concluding a decades-long struggle with a victory for international communism.

In order to better understand the situation the United States military faced in the Mekong delta during the Vietnam War, it is important to understand the geographic and historical forces at work in Vietnam, and, in particular, the Mekong delta prior to and

throughout American involvement. The Mekong River, some 2,600 miles in length, is the twelfth largest river in the world,[1] and the seventh longest river in Asia.[2] From its headwaters high in eastern Tibet,[3] the Mekong emerges at around 16,400 feet above sea level on the Tibet Plateau before passing through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.[4] As the Mekong passes through Southeast Asia, it drains an area of land approximately 307,000 square miles in size, an area slightly larger than the state of Texas.[5] At Phnom Penh, in Cambodia, the Mekong flows at a peak rate of 45,000 cubic meters per second; making it the third largest river in Asia in terms of volume, behind only the Yangtze and the Ganges-Brahmaputra (see Figure 1.1).[6]

Annually, a hydrographic phenomenon occurs within the Mekong River system. The Tonle Sap River enters the Mekong from the north at Phnom Penh. During the annual rainy season, the Mekong's increased volume causes the Tonle Sap River to reverse course for four months of each year and flow north toward Cambodia's Great

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[1] Milton Osborne, *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 16-17.

[2] Nguyen Thi Dieu, *The Mekong River and the Struggle for Indochina: Water, War, and Peace*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 3.

[3] In 1994, the source of the Mekong was finally determined to be in Eastern Tibet. Osborne, *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*, 12.

[4] Hart Schaaf and Russell H. Fifield, *The Lower Mekong: Challenge to Cooperation in Southeast Asia*. (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1963), 71.

[5] Schaaf, *The Lower Mekong*, 71.

[6] Schaaf, *The Lower Mekong*, 74. See also Effects of streamflow regulation and land cover change on the hydrology of the Mekong River Basin. No date. University of California, Irvine. 8 July 2006. <http://essgrad.ps.uci.edu/~ggoteti/research/MS_defense.ppt>.

Figure 1.1 Mekong River

Source: River with a Promise to Keep, A, No Date, Box 1, Folder 5, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 10 – Small Maps, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

Lake, the Tonle Sap, thus avoiding excessive floods downriver in the delta. During the dry season, when the Mekong's volume subsides, the Tonle Sap River again reverses its direction of flow and carries the excess water accumulated in the Great Lake toward the delta farther south in Vietnam.[7]

Also at Phnom Penh, the Mekong River splits to form upper and lower branches before it enters southern Vietnam and continues its course toward the South China Sea. The upper branch of the Mekong River empties into the South China Sea from six outlets. The lower branch of the Mekong, known during the Vietnam War as the Bassac River but now referred to as the Hau River, flows further south of the Mekong through the delta and spills into the South China Sea from three mouths. From its nine outlets, the Mekong River discharges some 450 to 470 billion cubic meters of water into the South China Sea annually.[8]

A river system of such magnitude as the Mekong inevitably attracted people, economic activity, and civilizations. The ancient Chinese referred to the Mekong delta as part of a larger area known as Funan. Chinese records describe the maritime civilization of Oc Eo in Funan, which thrived in the delta between the second and seventh centuries of the Common Era. According to French archaeologist Louis Malleret, Oc Eo consisted

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[7] Schaaf, *The Lower Mekong*, 76.

[8] Kite, Geoff. "Toward Sustainable Water Development: Hydrological Modeling of the Mekong River Basin." International Water Management Institute, Annual Report (1999-2000). 8 July 2006. <www.iwmicgiar.org/pubs/AReps/1999-2000/Scientific-GK.pdf>. See also Effects of streamflow regulation and land cover change on the hydrology of the Mekong River Basin. 8 July 2006. <http://essgrad.ps.uci.edu/~ggoteti/research/MS_defense.ppt>.

of a community and a harbor that flourished along oceanic trade routes at the time.[9] Chinese records also refer to the presence of Khmers in the Mekong delta as early as the third and fourth centuries.[10] Other civilizations emerged along the Mekong River in Cambodia and Laos throughout the following centuries. European explorers and traders eventually discovered the Mekong River. In the 1540s, at the dawn of the European Age of Exploration, Portuguese explorers made forays up the Mekong River and penetrated as far as present-day Cambodia.

The Mekong is not the only major river delta in Vietnam. In the north, the Red River enters Vietnam from southern China, forming a delta through which the Red drains into the Gulf of Tonkin. By the tenth century, Vietnamese people had established several communities in the fertile, flood-prone Red River delta, approximately 1,000 miles north of the Mekong delta. Though the Vietnamese people are believed to have arrived in the Red River delta from parts of southern China, the Vietnamese over time created a way of life and a culture independent of their Chinese ancestors.[11] Chinese cultural patterns, however, continued to influence Vietnamese people living in the Red River delta. The Vietnamese borrowed Confucian modes of governmental administration and mandarin management techniques from the Chinese, as well as agricultural production methods. The Vietnamese also lived with the threat of a Chinese invasion from the north, a danger which materialized on more than a few occasions over the centuries. Even as the

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[9] Nguyen Thi Dieu, *The Mekong River*, 16.

[10] Osborne, *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*, 23.

[11] Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xvii.

Vietnamese developed their own identity, culture, and society, the Chinese influence and the risk of possible invasion remained.[12]

Eventually, the population in the north swelled and the Vietnamese people in the Red River delta began looking to the south for more land upon which to settle. A slow southerly migration from the Red River delta began in the eleventh century. Over the next few hundred years, Vietnamese people migrated south. By the fifteenth century, the Vietnamese whose ancestors had left the Red River region had formed somewhat different societies and cultures as a result of living on a frontier for several generations. As the Vietnamese migrated and spread further south from the Red River, governing those people on the southern frontier from northern political centers became more difficult. Southerners developed an idea that a buffer existed between themselves and China. Over time, the Vietnamese in the frontier regions south of the Red River began to view China as a lesser threat to their security than the Vietnamese to the north.[13] By the seventeenth century, after having been removed several generations from living in the north, the Vietnamese living south of the Red River delta developed an autonomous, frontier mentality that led to the formation of the Nguyen feudal state, independent of the dominant Trinh state that had emerged in the north in their absence.

During the fifteenth century, as Vietnamese people continued their southerly migration, they encountered a region known as Champa. Champa was a Hindu kingdom in central Vietnam that thrived between the second and fifteenth centuries. In their

[12] In *The Birth of Vietnam*, Taylor also discusses how the Vietnamese resisted the Chinese, and how the Vietnamese developed a will to resist all foreign encroachment into their land.

[13] Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 297.

relentless drive south, the Vietnamese eventually conquered Champa in 1471.[14] Their kingdom conquered, the Chams held some autonomy until the Vietnamese finally scattered what remained of them into the highlands by the end of the seventeenth century.[15] Also, throughout the seventeenth century, the Vietnamese people living within the southerly Nguyen feudal state began arriving in the Mekong delta, where they encountered Khmers and began cultivating rice.

By the end of the seventeenth century, several Vietnamese communities had been established in the Mekong delta that attracted a few other people following the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in China in the spring of 1644.[16] Some three thousand Chinese soldiers loyal to the Ming eventually fled China and arrived in the delta to find the Vietnamese and the Khmers already struggling for political control in the region.[17] After the Chinese expatriates arrived in the Mekong delta in 1679, they established themselves as merchants in the communities of My Tho and Bien Hoa. There, the Chinese engaged in trade with seagoing vessels from China, Japan, and Europe.[18] Western European Christian missionaries, including the Jesuits whom the Japanese had expelled from Japan,

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[14] Spencer Tucker, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68.

[15] Li Tana, *Nguyen Conchin China: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Studies Program, 1998), 16.

[16] For specific dates on the demise of the Ming Dynasty in China, see Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 801, 809.

[17] Li Tana, *Nguyen Conchin China*, 33.

[18] Nola Cooke and Li Tana, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750 – 1880*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2004), 39.

arrived throughout the seventeenth century as well. The Jesuits soon began proselytizing throughout Vietnam.[19]

As more Vietnamese arrived in the Mekong delta, and as they asserted more political control over the region, the Nguyen feudal lords facilitated settlement therein for Vietnamese farmers. The Nguyen encouraged families to establish farms and homes where they liked, and allowed villages to arise where they would. The Nguyen only required the peasants to report to the proper authorities any land cleared and settled, and that the peasants pay their taxes.[20] Before one hundred years had passed since the arrival of the Vietnamese in the Mekong delta, the Nguyen exerted political control over the area and set about consolidating their gains in the region. More Chinese people migrated to the delta and Gia Dinh was organized as a province. By 1750, Saigon emerged as the center for political, economic, and military activity in the region. The community of My Tho, on the My Tho branch of the Mekong River, served as a military outpost to protect inland delta trade routes from the Khmers, who marauded from farther upriver in Cambodia. By the end of the 1750s, the Nguyen controlled the area from Tay Ninh south to the Mekong River, as well as all the land that stretched from there to the coast of the South China Sea.[21]

Europeans had been involved with the Nguyen in southern Vietnam since the early 1600s. The communities of Tourane (Da Nang) and Faifo (Hoi An) served as

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[19] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 59.

[20] Nguyen Thi Dieu, *The Mekong River*, 17-18.

[21] Cooke, *Water Frontier*, 41-42.

trading stations for merchants from Europe, as well as ports of entry for European Christian missionaries and other people. Alexandre de Rhodes, for example, moved to Vietnam with a group of Portuguese in 1627. He later transcribed the Vietnamese language into a Romanized version accessible to most Vietnamese people. The new alphabet was called *quoc ngu*, or the national language.[22] Also, during the turmoil between the Trinh and Nguyen clans throughout the 1600s, European traders made vast economic inroads into Vietnam. The Dutch, for example, traded arms to the Trinh faction in the north while the Portuguese assisted the Nguyen military forces in the south.[23]

Foreign trade helped the Nguyen expand into most parts of the Mekong delta during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Nguyen lords, however, proved unable to retain control over their entire domain. In 1772, the Tay Son Rebellion erupted, started by three brothers from Binh Dinh Province. The Tay Son defeated the Nguyen in the south, the Trinh in the north, and overthrew the Le Dynasty. Rebels captured Gia Dinh (Saigon) and Thang Long (modern-day Hanoi). Later, in the 1790s, the three rebel brothers died, and the surviving Nguyen lord, Nguyen Anh, appealed to Monsignor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Behaine, a French missionary and the Bishop of Adran, for assistance in reestablishing Nguyen dominance.[24] After repeated appeals and appearances before Louis XVI, Pigneau and Nguyen Anh finally received French

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[22] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 59.

[23] Helen B. Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live: Resistance to Foreign Aggression from Early Times Through the Nineteenth Century*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 52-54.

[24] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 391.

assistance. With Western arms and military advisors, the Tay Son Rebellion was quelled by 1799. By 1802, Nguyen Anh had established himself as Emperor Gia Long (ruled 1802-1820) with his throne in Hue. Suppression of the Tay Son Rebellion set the stage for French involvement in Vietnam for the next one hundred and fifty years.

Initially, the newly organized Nguyen emperors found dealing with France beneficial. The French presence and power reinforced the Nguyen's sole claim to the Vietnamese throne. The Tay Son Rebellion had diminished the influence of the Trinh in the north. This enabled Nguyen Anh, with French assistance, to unite all of Vietnam under a single dynasty after the defeat of the Tay Son rebels. France also introduced technological innovations that strengthened the ties between the Nguyen government and the people it meant to administer. For example, France contributed to the construction of new canals in the Mekong delta, and assisted in maintaining existing ones.[25] The French, upon arriving in the Mekong delta, realized the great agricultural potential of the area. They worked to dig new canals in order to create more navigable waterways and drain new land for farming.[26] The new canals also provided some potential military security, as marching troops overland throughout the Mekong delta proved tedious.[27]

With French engineering assistance, two million hectares (approximately five million acres) of new land opened for agricultural purposes in the delta in the forty-five years before 1930. As a result of the availability of new arable land, the Mekong delta

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[25] Nguyen Thi Dieu, *The Mekong River*, 29.

[26] Virginia Thompson, *French Indochina*. (New York: MacMillan Company, 1937), 216.

[27] Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina, 1870-1940*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 58.

experienced an increase in population.[28] The French also assisted the Vietnamese in clearing and preparing these new lands for agricultural purposes.

Recognizing the benefits from trading with the French, the Nguyen emperors then granted equal trading concessions to all foreigners. This worked to the advantage of the Nguyen in that a variety of manufactured goods from Europe became available in Vietnam for the first time. Eventually, equal trading status with other foreign countries created a strain on the relationships between the French in Vietnam and the Nguyen emperors.

With more Frenchmen and other Europeans now in Vietnam, tensions between the foreigners and the indigenous Vietnamese mounted. Many zealous missionaries from Western Europe, dreaming of a Christian empire in Asia, came to Vietnam to proselytize. In many cases, Christian missionaries faced official obstacles put in place by the Nguyen government, and outright persecution from the Vietnamese people. Minh Mang (ruled 1820-1841), Gia Long's successor, persecuted Christians. Thieu Tri (ruled 1841-1847) followed Minh Mang and continued to torment Christians in Vietnam. Anti-Christian edicts abounded throughout the country in the nineteenth century. The treatment of the missionaries at the hands of the Vietnamese eventually provided the French the excuse they needed to intervene militarily. In 1847, the French fleet at Da Nang, hoping to secure the release of several imprisoned Catholic missionaries before departing, fired on the town destroying a few port facilities and some ships.[29]

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[28] Thompson, *French Indochina*, 216.

[29] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 70.

Tensions between the indigenous population and the foreigners remained high in the 1850s after Tu Duc (ruled 1847-1883) became emperor. Tu Duc continued to sanction the persecution of Christians, which gave French forces further reason to intervene. In 1858, the French fleet returned to Da Nang and captured the city. Farther south, French forces took possession of Saigon in 1859. By 1861, reinforcements consolidated the French position in Vietnam, forcing Tu Duc to bargain for concessions. From the deal brokered between the French and the Nguyen, France received Saigon and three adjoining provinces, Poulo Condore Island, the right for Catholic priests to preach in Vietnam, three ports from which to trade, and the exclusive guarantee that Vietnam would not cede land to any country other than France.[30] France now had a solid foothold in Indochina and moved to establish absolute dominance over Cochinchina, its new colony in southern Vietnam.

After the court in Hue initially ceded land to France in southern Vietnam in 1862, resistance to French colonization and occupation of Cochinchina took the form of guerrilla warfare in the Mekong delta. By 1867, France had seized the western portion of the Mekong delta, claiming it was a refuge and a staging area for guerrillas who sought to undermine French colonial authority. Throughout the 1870s, as the French appetite for new land and French land holdings increased in southern Vietnam, French colonial administrators and their Vietnamese collaborators became targets for guerrilla assassins in the delta. Guerrilla activity continued throughout the decade, and rebels periodically seized towns in the delta and disrupted French efforts at efficient governance. By the

[30] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 76.

1880s, France had subdued Cochinchina, but continued to experience minor underground resistance in the colony.[31]

With a modicum of stability in Cochinchina, French colonial officials set about altering the social and political landscape in southern Vietnam. Colonial administrators established new institutions in Cochinchina based on French models that affected taxation, education, law, and land use throughout the new French colony. Many of the Vietnamese peasants living in Cochinchina had no real experience with Western modes of governance, and therefore became susceptible to French exploitation. Beginning in 1880, each male resident of Cochinchina, permanent or temporary, had to pay a head tax to the proper colonial offices. Indigenous Vietnamese working for the French, or those that collaborated, were exempt from having to pay the head tax, as were Europeans living in Vietnam.[32] One estimate indicates the head tax represented the "price of rice consumed by the typical village cultivator in three months."[33]

French colonial officials also restructured the existing educational system familiar to the Vietnamese. Prior to French colonial rule, the Vietnamese education system mirrored that of the Chinese, in that students prepared to take exams that, if passed, would lead to a life of civil service. The French colonial administration established an education system that produced servants of France.[34] The new French rulers also

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[31] Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live*, 126.

[32] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1973), 63.

[33] Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina*, 80.

[34] Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live*, 135.

changed the legal system. The old legal code most Vietnamese people understood emphasized the family, the village, or the state. The new legal code focused more on the punishment of an individual person, not the welfare of the group. These novel educational and legal concepts alienated many Vietnamese.[35]

The Vietnamese people's traditional land tenure and use patterns, upon which their livelihoods depended, also underwent profound alterations after the French established their colonial dominance in Cochinchina. French colonial officials reduced the amount of communal land granted to a village by the court in Hue. Communal land often sustained villages in times of want or need, and also assisted in paying various village expenses.[36] In French Cochinchina, communal land areas dwindled. As French officials took more land away from the peasantry and allowed foreigners to establish plantations in the delta, increasing numbers of Vietnamese peasants became landless. As the available land in the delta became concentrated in the hands of a few foreign landowners, the displaced Vietnamese peasants, in order to survive, felt compelled to seek employment as regular agricultural workers on one of the many large, foreign-owned plantations that began emerging throughout Cochinchina. Vietnamese peasants also turned to tenant farming and sharecropping, agricultural practices never before seen in the delta, or anywhere else in Vietnam. As a result, more landless peasants existed in Cochinchina than in any other region in Vietnam.[37]

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[35] Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live*, 143.

[36] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 15.

[37] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 30-31.

The new roles assumed by Vietnamese peasants in the delta left many with very little incentive. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers often had to pay exorbitant rents with a portion of their crop yields. With little chance to profit from their labors, the peasants seemed less inclined to be good stewards of the land. Land went untended and neglected while agricultural implements fell into disrepair. Also, the landowners themselves had little reason to invest in land maintenance, as new land remained plentiful. As a result, agricultural productivity declined. Vietnam now produced fewer tons of rice than Siam, China, and Japan. Even with a decline in productivity, France began exporting from Cochinchina vast quantities of rice for world consumption.[38] In 1860, Cochinchina exported only 57,000 tons of the cereal; in 1870, 229,000 tons of rice was exported for consumption on world markets.[39]

In 1897, Paul Doumer arrived in Cochinchina to serve as Governor General. Doumer implemented several policies during his five year tenure that carried the French colony into the twentieth century and made Cochinchina profitable for France. Doumer centralized French authority and disbanded the emperor's Cabinet of Mandarins.[40] He granted French merchants monopolies on various products, most notably salt, opium, and alcohol. Doumer continued exporting rice and expanded Cochinchina's exports to include rubber. Many of the landless Vietnamese peasants during Doumer's tenure found work on civil projects that included railway and asphalt road construction. He also

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[38] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 139-141.

[39] Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina*, 58.

[40] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 116.

mobilized other landless peasants to work in mines, on plantations, and in the fields. Doumer established Indochina as a place from which France could draw natural resources and have a captive market for finished products.[41]

After Doumer centralized French authority and sanctioned the monopolies, exploiting the Vietnamese peasants became more facile. For example, in 1902, the French colonial administration forced all Vietnamese rice wine distilleries to sell their products to the colonial government at a fixed rate of purchase. The colonial administration then turned the product around and sold it back to the general public at a much higher price through their monopolies.[42] Eventually, in order to boost profits, the government demanded villages purchase a certain quantity of alcohol every month of the year. If a village failed to purchase its established monthly quota, the French authorities assumed that village bootlegged illegal alcohol.[43]

Opium also became profitable for the French administration in Indochina. Doumer built an opium refinery in Saigon that developed a product many Vietnamese began consuming. Soon, addicts abounded and opium accounted for one-third of the income of the colonial administration.[44] Not wishing to lose profits for the colonial coffers, but acknowledging the mounting international pressure from other governments to outlaw opium, the French authorities in Cochinchina enacted token laws that actually

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[41] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 118.

[42] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 65.

[43] Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 67.

[44] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 116-17.

reduced opium consumption slightly. In the 1930s, the French colonial administration increased the sale price of opium and forbade the opening of any new opium dens or sales warehouses.[45]

The regulation of opium and alcohol proved profitable for the French in Indochina, but the Vietnamese people did not consume alcohol and opium as widely as they used salt. Vietnamese used vast quantities of salt to preserve fish and make *nuoc mam*, a popular seasoned fish sauce. The French colonial administrators realized salt would generate considerable tax revenue, so the production, retail, and consumption of salt were all taxed. The French once again demanded the salt be sold to the administration's monopoly. As with alcohol and opium merchants, the French salt retailers sold their product to the general public at a higher price. When the French proved unable to sell enough salt efficiently, contracts were distributed to Chinese merchants granting them the right to sell salt to the public. With more people involved in the exchange of salt, taxes increased by nearly five times in ten years between 1897 and 1907.[46] As a result, people purchased and consumed less salt even while illegal salt production soared. Some estimates indicated that a Vietnamese person needed to consume twenty-two pounds of salt per year to maintain an adequate dietary standard. By 1937, many Vietnamese peasants remained under the bar as they consumed around fifteen pounds per capita of salt per annum.[47]

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[45] Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina*, 77.

[46] Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina*, 77.

[47] Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in French Indochina*, 78.

By 1884, the French colonial administration controlled all of Vietnam from Cochinchina in the south, through Annam in central Vietnam, to Tonkin in the north. The French had also established protectorates over Cambodia in 1864 and over Laos in 1893.[48] The beginning of the twentieth century also saw a continuation of the egregious exploitation of the Vietnamese peasants at the hands of the French colonial government. Beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese offered more and better organized resistance to the French authorities in Vietnam until France succumbed and exited Indochina altogether in the late 1950s.

Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh emerged as the two leading Vietnamese scholar-patriots who embodied the collective Vietnamese will to resist French colonialism in the early twentieth century. Each had a similar goal, but a different strategy for accomplishing it. Phan Boi Chau, born in Nghe Anh in 1867 (Ho Chi Minh was born in Nghe Anh in 1890), realized as the twentieth century dawned that traditional Confucian Vietnamese society lacked the sophistication needed to handle the challenges it faced from the West. France imported into Vietnam in the last half of the nineteenth century numerous technological advances, political and economic institutions, and an educational and legal system unfamiliar to many Vietnamese. After fifty years, many Vietnamese people came to realize a traditional Confucian society could not cope with the new Western ways introduced by the French. Phan Boi Chau believed the technology, political models, and economic systems of the West could ultimately prove

[48] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 54, 221, and 445.

advantageous to the Vietnamese in their effort to rid the country of the French.[49] Phan Boi Chau valued political activism and education, but advocated radical changes and believed violent overthrow of the French colonial administration was necessary in order to achieve national independence.[50]

Phan Chu Trinh, another of the prominent early twentieth century resistance leaders, sought social improvement through institutional reforms. Phan Chu Trinh, born in Quang Nam in 1872, believed that only by collaborating with the French would the necessary social reforms be realized and implemented.[51] Phan Chu Trinh espoused the belief that once France accomplished its civilizing mission in Indochina, and once it had established a viable new Indochinese government, France would depart from Asia.[52] Phan Chu Trinh disagreed with Phan Boi Chau on tactics; he believed violence would accomplish very little, and the path to a secure Vietnamese future lay in working peacefully within the French colonial establishment. As a result, the great debate among Vietnamese who desired social change at the beginning of the twentieth century revolved around immediate national independence versus gradual institutional reform.

Other Vietnamese scholar-patriot leaders in the early twentieth century continued looking to the West for ideas about how other colonized peoples throughout history dealt

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[49] William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 18.

[50] William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900 – 1941*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 51.

[51] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 51.

[52] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 21.

with oppressive colonial regimes.[53] In the first decades of the twentieth century, several indigenous resistance and nationalist groups formed, but none unified all the various factions against the French to produce the desired result of independence or social reform. The various factions continued to disagree on tactics. Among the numerous groups vying for power was Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Youth Movement, created in the early 1920s. The Revolutionary Youth Movement existed as one of many groups in Vietnam at the time. Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Youth Movement had about one thousand members by the end of the 1920s, and was viewed by the French police force as a serious threat to French rule in Indochina.[54]

Another active group, the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* (VNQDD), formed by intellectuals in Hanoi in 1927, also wished to see the French exit Vietnam. The VNQDD emphasized a republican form of government, similar to those in the West. Members of the VNQDD also remained nationalistic, progressive politically, socially and economically, and were anticommunist.[55] The VNQDD attracted many Vietnamese and remained active throughout the 1930s and 40s promoting independence and even attacking French garrisons in some areas.

The indigenous independence movement remained fractured until the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, managed to lay the ground-work for eventual unification of some nationalist groups and the communists.

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[53] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885 – 1925*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 203.

[54] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 32.

[55] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 28-29.

Throughout the 1930s, however, the ICP members did not quite know how best to appeal to the nationalists. Conditions during the Great Depression forced some Vietnamese peasants in central Vietnam to unseat the local French authorities and form soviets, or peasant associations designed to govern. The soviets lowered rents and divided wealthy landowners' holdings among the peasants.[56] The communists in many cases filled the resulting power vacuums created by the removal of French authorities.[57] In this way, the ICP began to make significant inroads in several places throughout Vietnam.

In the spring of 1931, the French authorities reacted brutally to the soviet established by Vietnamese peasants in Nghe-Tinh Province. The French executed some Indochinese Communist Party leaders of the soviet while other ICP members received long prison terms. The incident illuminated latent unrest and dissatisfaction with French colonialism in Indochina.[58]

Not until after the arrival of the Imperial Japanese Army in Vietnam in 1940 did some nationalists and communists finally unite under a common banner espousing the dual goals of national independence and social reform.[59] Some Vietnamese believed the Japanese would provide Indochina the salvation from France it desired. Many Vietnamese collaborated with the Japanese, but several nationalists found the prospect of

[56] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 34.

[57] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 224.

[58] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 35.

[59] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 39.

Japanese occupation as bad as that of French colonialism.[60] The *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or the Vietnam Independence League (more commonly referred to as the Viet Minh) formed in 1941 as the military arm that sought to carry out the political plans of the ICP. The Viet Minh grew from a generation of reformists and activists different from those who preceded them in the early twentieth century. The Viet Minh relied on the peasantry for recruits, and communicated national political aspirations in language the peasantry could understand.[61] When the Viet Minh declared French imperialism and Japanese fascism to be the enemies of all Indochinese people, many peasants understood the message.[62]

When the Japanese Imperial Army arrived in Vietnam, it left the French colonial administration intact, much as Germany had done with the French government at Vichy after France fell to the Nazis in June, 1940, at the outset of World War II. Japan seized Indochina early in the war with the intention of securing for its war purposes the vast natural resources of the region. Shortly thereafter, Japan found itself embroiled in total war against the United States, and merely used Indochina as a staging area for operations in the western Pacific.[63] Japan never fully realized its economic plans for exploiting Indochina's rich resources, especially after securing Malaya and Indonesia in 1942.[64]

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[60] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 256-57.

[61] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 206.

[62] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 262.

[63] Le Manh Hung, *The Impact of World War II on the Economy of Vietnam, 1939-1945*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2004), 285.

[64] Le Manh Hung, *The Impact of World War II*, 284.

Throughout the period of Japanese occupation, some Vietnamese nationalists continued resisting. For many Vietnamese, Japanese soldiers merely replaced the French; the desire to be rid of foreigners remained the same. Ho Chi Minh called for Vietnamese nationalists and patriots to subvert Japanese efforts. Seeking new recruits, Viet Minh cadre infiltrated several Japanese and French sponsored youth movements. Forecasting for the future, the Viet Minh cadre worked to have a base of support already in place when they could seize power after the Allied victory and the inevitable Japanese departure from Indochina.

When World War II ended with the formal Japanese surrender on 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were poised to fill the power vacuum left in Vietnam. On the same day, in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence. At Potsdam earlier in the year, however, the Allies formulated a plan for repatriating the Japanese soldiers from Indochina. A Chinese armed force moved into northern Vietnam to manage the Japanese departure from the region, while a British force oversaw the Japanese exodus from southern Vietnam. With Chinese and British troops now in Vietnam, the Viet Minh would have to wait to seize power. Over the next several months, the Chinese soldiers departed, and France, with British assistance, reasserted herself as colonial ruler of Indochina. As French intransigence continued, and as antagonisms reached a boiling point, war between the Viet Minh and the French erupted

in Hai Phong on 23 November 1946, when the French cruiser *Suffren* shelled the port city.[65] More violence followed in Hanoi in December.

War in Indochina raged for the next seven-and-one-half years until the Viet Minh scored a final decisive victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu.[66] With victory secured on the battlefield, Ho Chi Minh sought to consolidate the Viet Minh position over France at the conference table at Geneva, and unite all of Vietnam under his leadership. The representatives of the countries that emerged to dominate world affairs after World War II denied Ho Chi Minh his total victory. The only documents signed at the Geneva Conference affecting Indochina guaranteed a ceasefire in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.[67] The Geneva Accords, agreed upon in 1954 by China, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France, temporarily divided Vietnam into two military zones: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north, and the State of Vietnam, later to become the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), in the south.

The Accords also called for popular elections to be held in 1956, the results of which would unify North and South Vietnam. In the meantime, North Vietnam and South Vietnam shared a common "temporary military demarcation line" at the seventeenth parallel. Ho Chi Minh and the communists took control of North Vietnam while the French, scheduled to leave in two years, regrouped in the south. Soon, the

[65] Others indicate the French-Indochina War began on 19 December 1946 when hostilities erupted in Hanoi. See Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 142.

[66] Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege if Dien Bien Phu*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002). Fall provides a detailed account of the months-long struggle between the Viet Minh and the French forces in the remote mountain valley of Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam.

[67] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 204.

United States offered support to Ngo Dinh Diem, the prime minister in the south. As France prepared to leave Indochina, the United States stood ready to fill the void.

With the division of Vietnam came a relocation of military forces. France evacuated all its forces from the north and redeployed them south of the seventeenth parallel prior to eventual complete withdrawal. Also, the Viet Minh headed north as per the instructions outlined in the Geneva Accords.[68] Hanoi, however, chose to leave some small but experienced military units and political cadres in South Vietnam, anticipating further action in the near future. The U.S. military attaché in Saigon estimated the force to contain approximately five thousand men in 1956.[69] Dr. Wesley Fishel of Michigan State University estimated the holdover Viet Minh in South Vietnam to be approximately ten thousand men.[70] With a clandestine politico-military network still intact in South Vietnam after the Geneva Convention, Hanoi remained poised and capable of intervening in South Vietnamese affairs.

South Vietnam's new administration, headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, moved quickly to consolidate its power in Saigon. With an inevitable power struggle pending in the city, militant elements of the Hoa Hao religious sect cast their lot with the Binh Xuyen, the organized crime syndicate in Saigon, to challenge Diem's fledgling Government of Vietnam (GVN) for control. Ten of eleven subsects of the Cao Dai also joined the Hoa

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[68] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 204.

[69] "North Vietnam's Role in the South, June 1968," Folder 15, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[70] Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 75.

Hao and Binh Xuyen in the struggle against Diem.[71] Fighting erupted in Saigon in March, 1955, and by October Bay Vien, the leader of the Binh Xuyen, fled to Paris. The remaining Binh Xuyen members fled to the Rung Sat Special Zone, a vast tract of mangrove swamp with hundreds of interconnected waterways on the coast southeast of Saigon. Diem dispatched the Vietnamese Navy *dinassauts* (naval assault divisions) into the Rung Sat to pursue the remaining Binh Xuyen elements, who finally surrendered. After Diem consolidated his control in Saigon, many of the resisting elements of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects scattered to the hills along the Cambodian border. Others rallied to the Diem government. After the victory, Ngo Dinh Diem conducted a referendum that resulted in his election as president of South Vietnam, displacing Emperor Bao Dai.

President Diem, upon assuming office, almost immediately went about alienating large swaths of South Vietnamese society. Between overt cronyism and nepotism, which riddled his administration, corruption, religious intolerance, and ineffective land reform policies, Diem made very little progress in diminishing the influence and appeal of the Viet Minh still present in South Vietnam. President Diem was a Catholic, unlike the great majority of the South Vietnamese population, who were Buddhist. As such, he reserved numerous appointments in his government for men of similar faith. Many Buddhists felt slighted.

Diem also allowed his brothers to occupy various positions of power within the GVN. Diem's brother Nhu held a prominent position close to the executive. While

[71] Pike, *Viet Cong*, 68.

assisting Diem, Nhu established the *Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang Dang* (Revolutionary Personalist Labor Party). This group mirrored a communist organization in structure and function as five-man teams gathered information about political rivals and their activities. Nhu headed the secret police force and also commanded the Vietnamese Special Forces, which amounted to little more than his own private army. Using the two units together, Nhu guaranteed his position of power within the GVN.[72]

Diem had other brothers. Ngo Dinh Thuc, Diem's older brother, became archbishop of Hue in 1961. Hue became the epicenter of Buddhist unrest and dissatisfaction with the Diem regime in the early 1960s. Ngo Dinh Can, another of Diem's brothers, held no official position in the GVN but enjoyed immense power. With his own personal army in northern South Vietnam, Can sometimes fought the Viet Cong, terrified potential rivals to his power, allegedly smuggled rice to Hanoi, and trafficked opium throughout Asia. As Diem sought Can's advice on issues pertaining to northern South Vietnam, Can was able to act with impunity and very little fear of official governmental reprisal.[73] The conspicuous corruption and nepotism practiced by many in the Diem administration did little to attract popular support for the Saigon government among ordinary South Vietnamese peasants.

When Diem assumed the executive office, estimates indicated that one quarter of one percent of the rural population in the Mekong delta owned forty percent of the rice producing land. Furthermore, estimates also disclosed that upward of eighty percent of

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[72] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 292.

[73] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 288-292.

the population in the delta were landless peasants or tenant farmers.[74] Many Mekong delta landlords fled to metropolitan areas to avoid the fighting in the countryside between the French and the Viet Minh. After the war, the newly established GVN sold abandoned land in parcels to peasants for profits. Many landowners stayed in urban areas and collected excessive rents from tenant farmers. Regarding land policy, people in the rural areas did not see much difference between the French colonial administration and the Diem government. Tenant farmers and landless peasants in the former French colony continued to suffer under the Diem administration. The communists in the Mekong delta sought to capitalize on the situation by propagandizing against what many peasants already felt to be an unjust government. Diem missed an important early opportunity to gain the confidence and loyalty of the delta's rural population by failing to implement an effective policy of land redistribution upon assuming executive office.

Diem realized he competed against the communists for the support of the South Vietnamese peasantry. If his initial land policies favored large landowners and ignored landless peasants, then his Agroville and subsequent Strategic Hamlet programs further alienated the peasantry. Launched in 1959, the Agroville program attempted to bring "development and the amenities of urban life to the countryside," but "the underlying motivation was rural security."[75] Diem and his brother Nhu believed they could persuade the rural population to support the GVN by building Agrovilles that provided various

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[74] Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam, 1954 – 1960*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 119.

[75] David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930 – 1975*. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2003), 203.

utilities and services the rural peasants had never before known. The Agrovilles offered water, electricity, health care, and security from the Viet Cong.[76]

Despite its benevolent intentions, the Agroville program became very unpopular among the peasants. The program often forced peasants to leave ancestral lands and move into a village that more closely resembled a concentration camp rather than a home. The GVN often forced peasants into building their own Agroville with little to no remuneration. Though designed to keep the Viet Cong from recruiting among the rural population by isolating them, the Agrovilles had the opposite effect. The Viet Cong penetrated them with ease and continued to recruit.

By 1961, the Agroville program was defunct. The original plan called for eighty Agrovilles to be built in South Vietnam. At the program's demise, only twenty had been completed.[77] In 1962, the Strategic Hamlet Program followed the Agroville program. The two programs differed very little in concept and design. Both remained riddled with official corruption, mismanaged from Saigon, and unable to keep Viet Cong cadre from interacting with the rural population. Both programs, designed to assist the Vietnamese people against the advances of the communists and generate support for the Diem government, further alienated some peasants from the GVN.

Meanwhile, the communists in South Vietnam formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in December 1960 as the political counterweight of the military arm, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). Together, they were known as the Viet

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[76] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 5.

[77] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 5.

Cong. North Vietnam provided a lot of the "expertise, doctrinal guidance, insurgency know-how, and, above all, organizational skill" necessary to assist the NLF.[78] The communists sought to gain support from the rural population throughout the Mekong delta and "turn rural Vietnam into a sea of angry villagers who would rise up simultaneously in the General Uprising and smash all existing social forms."[79] With an organized politico-military apparatus in place in South Vietnam, North Vietnam could then begin to infiltrate men and materiel, which occurred on a grand scale throughout the early 1960s. One US intelligence report indicated that

> Infiltration began on a substantial scale in 1959. At the end of 1960, Viet Cong Main Force strength was estimated at 10 battalions and 5,500 men. Regional and local guerrillas probably had a strength of about 30,000. By the end of 1963, Viet Cong Main Force strength had risen to 30 battalions and around 35,000 men. It is important to note that this figure represents only a fraction of the total Viet Cong political/military apparatus operating in the South.[80]

During the period, intelligence confirmed that nearly nineteen thousand troops infiltrated into South Vietnam from the north. These troops were mostly ethnic Southerners and Viet Minh veterans. Intelligence estimates indicated that approximately thirteen thousand more men probably infiltrated into South Vietnam.[81]

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[78] Pike, *Viet Cong*, 78.

[79] Pike, *Viet Cong*, 32.

[80] "North Vietnam's Role in the South, June 1968," Folder 15, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 10.

[81] "North Vietnam's Role in the South," June 1968, Folder 15, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 10.

The Mekong delta also provided the NLF and PLAF with ample human resources. With nearly two-thirds of South Vietnam's arable land, the Mekong delta had attracted a vast population by 1960.[82] US Army intelligence estimated the population of the Mekong delta to be approximately five million people, or about one-third of the total population of South Vietnam.[83] The population density in the Mekong delta averaged about two hundred people per square kilometer.[84]

After the November 1963 assassination of Diem and his brother Nhu, the GVN fell into complete chaos, temporarily incapable of governing or providing security for the residents of the delta. Increasingly, Viet Cong recruiters made inroads among the Mekong delta peasants. As a result, the number of insurgents the VC could field at any time to oppose the GVN continued to soar.

All parties involved in the struggle for control of the Mekong delta realized the region's importance. In 1965, the Viet Cong increased pressure on the GVN in the IV Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ).[85] The IV CTZ witnessed the most VC initiated incidents of the four CTZs in South Vietnam in 1965. The Viet Cong overran ten GVN outposts,

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[82] "Riverine Operations in the Delta (May 68 – June 69)." CHECO Report Number 179, Reel 23. Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Reports of Southeast Asia, 1961-1975, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 1.

[83] "Army Forces in Riverine Operations" Military Review, August 1967, Folder 09, Box 09, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02 - Military Operations, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Also see Colonel David H. Hackworth and Eilhys England. *Steel My Soldiers' Hearts*. (New York: Simon and Schuster 2002), 15.

[84] Major General William B. Fulton. *Vietnam Studies: Riverine Operations, 1966-1969*. (Washington: Department of the Army, 1973), 20. Fulton estimates the Mekong delta to contain closer to half of South Vietnam's total population, 47.

[85] MACV divided South Vietnam into four military regions known as Corps Tactical Zones. I CTZ consisted of the five provinces in northern South Vietnam. The Central Highlands made up II CTZ. A large area surrounding Saigon made up III CTZ. Sixteen provinces in the Mekong Delta made up IV CTZ.

none of which the Saigon regime reoccupied. As a result, rice production decreased.[86] The United States recognized the delta as the rice bowl of South Vietnam where the majority of South Vietnam's citizens resided. With neither the agricultural produce from the region nor the support of the population residing there the Government of South Vietnam could never hope to enjoy a sustainable future. The Viet Cong also understood the vital importance to their cause of controlling the delta and its many resources. For many of the same reasons the GVN sought to control the delta, so too did the Viet Cong.

[86] "Riverine Operations in the Delta (Feb 66 – Jun 68)." CHECO Report Number 178, Reel 23. Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Reports of Southeast Asia, 1961-1975, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 10-11.

CHAPTER II

THE MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE ARRIVES

In the early 1960s, in response to the growing Viet Cong threat throughout South Vietnam, and in the Mekong delta particularly, President John F. Kennedy increased the number of US military advisors already in South Vietnam to around sixteen thousand toward the end of 1963. The US Navy played a limited advisory role with only seven hundred forty-two advisors in Vietnam.[87] The South Vietnamese Navy (VNN) remained a small force at the time with only six thousand two hundred officers and men. The VNN operated only fifty patrol boats and just over two hundred riverine and amphibious craft.[88] American naval officers, acting only as advisors, soon accompanied Vietnamese-manned vessels on patrol throughout the Mekong delta and along the coasts.

After a modest expansion in the early 1960s, the VNN consisted of the River Force and the Junk Force (also referred to as the Sea Force). The River Force's primary mission included ferrying South Vietnamese troops and supplies along the rivers and canals of the Mekong delta. The mission of the Junk Force consisted of patrolling coastal waters, and occasionally stopping and boarding suspicious craft suspected of importing contraband for the insurgent Viet Cong forces.[89] With an increased South Vietnamese

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[87] Frank Uhlig, Jr., editor. *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 279.

[88] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 279.

[89] Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 21.

and American naval presence on the waterways of the Mekong delta, and all along the coast of South Vietnam, came a heightened awareness of the role the North Vietnamese played in supporting the insurgency in the south. Suspicious of North Vietnamese assistance and infiltration, the United States Navy commissioned a fact finding mission to determine the extent of North Vietnamese activity.

Early in 1964, Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), sent a group of nine naval officers to Vietnam to measure the impact of North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam. Admiral Felt assigned Rear Admiral Paul Savidge, Jr., commander of the Amphibious Training Command, U.S. Pacific Fleet, as the ranking officer. The officers planned to travel throughout South Vietnam's Mekong delta and along the coasts, but Rear Admiral Savidge contracted a severe illness and had to return to the United States. Captain Phillip H. Bucklew, commander of the Pacific Fleet's Naval Operations Support Group, assumed command after Rear Admiral Savidge departed.[90] The assembly of officers included representatives from the Pacific Fleet, others from Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), members of the Navy section of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), and men from SEAL Team One.[91] Captain Bucklew and his team covered thousands of miles and talked to hundreds of people. The group of officers

> talked with local customs officials, members of the Civil Guard, Special Forces team members at remote outposts, VNN officers on ships and junks, U.S. Navy advisors, staff members at South

[90] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 73.

[91] Richard L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea: The United States Navy in Vietnam*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 57.

> Vietnamese Army III and IV Corps headquarters, the naval attaché at the U.S. embassy, and General Paul Harkins (then Chief of the U.S. MAAG).[92]

The team determined, in its report dated 15 February 1964, that

> Viet Cong military personnel are infiltrating primarily over the land routes, while the Bassac and the Mekong River complex provides a natural and easily penetrable waterway route for infiltration and movement of heavy material.… the use of seagoing junks and fishing boats as a means of infiltrating special Viet Cong agents by sea into the northern area of the Republic of Vietnam… [has] been proven by capture. There is evidence that limited amounts of supplies, including heavy machinery, and weapons have been infiltrated into northern and central Republic of Vietnam in the same way.... Capture on the island of Phu Quoc of material used for explosives, and reported movement of limited amounts of Viet Cong personnel to and from the island, reasonably indicate similar, though perhaps limited, activity in the Gulf of Siam.[93]

The Bucklew Report, as the document came to be known, criticized the effectiveness of the Junk Force and the River Force at curbing the rate of infiltration. Much of the criticism stemmed from inadequate leadership within the VNN. The VNN remained under the command of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officers who used the River Force primarily for troop lift duties and to resupply bases in the delta.[94]

The Bucklew Report made several recommendations; the only one implemented with any immediacy was the creation of a Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) position within the South Vietnamese Navy. With a CNO, the VNN became more involved

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[92] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 73.

[93] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 74.

[94] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 278.

within the Joint General Staff (JGS) decision making process.[95] The Bucklew Report also made numerous other recommendations including calls for air reconnaissance patrols and the creation of a coastal blockading force that included ships and aircraft from the US Navy's Seventh Fleet, already on station in the Gulf of Tonkin and in the South China Sea. The report also suggested more US naval advisors be provided to both the Junk Force and the River Force.[96]

Approximately one year would pass between the submission of the Bucklew Report, with all of its conclusions and suggestions, and a dramatic increase in US naval activity in South Vietnam. One incident in particular did more than any other to convince any remaining skeptics in the American military establishment that North Vietnam and its communist allies, particularly China and the Soviet Union, orchestrated and supported a great deal of the growing Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam. On 3 March 1965, Lieutenant James S. Bowers, a US Army pilot, observed from the cockpit of his helicopter a suspicious floating object in the Vung Ro Bay, north of Nha Trang, on the central coast of South Vietnam. Upon closer examination, Lieutenant Bowers determined the floating object to be an oceangoing trawler camouflaged with potted trees and plants on its deck and pilothouse. He radioed his discovery to the Second Coastal Zone advisor, Lieutenant Harvey P. Rodgers, US Navy, and the Vung Ro Incident ensued.[97]

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[95] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 58. The offices of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff may be considered the Vietnamese equivalent to those of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

[96] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 74-75.

[97] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 76.

Over the next several days, airstrikes destroyed the trawler while South Vietnamese Rangers assaulted and secured a nearby beachhead. Vietnamese Rangers discovered the incontrovertible evidence that proved North Vietnam and her communist allies were in league with the Viet Cong. The Vietnamese Rangers found and extracted eighty to one hundred tons of materiel from eleven different caches in the area.[98] Materiel in the caches on shore consisted of weapons and ammunition including approximately one million small arms rounds, over three thousand rifles of Chinese manufacture, anti-tank rockets of Soviet design, grenades produced in China as late as May, 1964, recoilless rifle rounds, mortar rounds, and hundreds of pounds of TNT.[99] The Rangers found the weapons packaged in crates bearing Chinese markings, indicating their places of origin. The Rangers also discovered tons of medicine and medical supplies, antibiotics, and vitamins.

Materials salvaged from the vessel, which was manufactured in Communist China, provided several other indicators of North Vietnamese involvement. A newspaper from Hai Phong (the principal port city in North Vietnam), dated 23 January 1965, appeared in the inventory, as did North Vietnamese nautical charts, mail with addresses in North Vietnam, and health records and photographs of North Vietnamese Army soldiers.[100] Other documentation found aboard the salvaged trawler indicated that it had

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[98] The Evidence at Vung Ro Bay, 23 February 1965, Folder 05, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[99] The Evidence at Vung Ro Bay, Douglas Pike Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[100] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 77.

made twenty-two other voyages to South Vietnam to deliver supplies.[101] The sizable trawler and substantial arms caches discovered at Vung Ro Bay confirmed what the US Navy believed to be true as recorded in the Bucklew Report: that massive infiltration of arms and materiel from North Vietnam into South Vietnam occurred via large, oceangoing vessels.

The incident at Vung Ro Bay immediately led to the launching of Operation Market Time (the units involved were eventually referred to as Task Force 115).[102] One week after the discoveries at Vung Ro Bay, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, MACV, convened a conference to discuss possibilities of increasing the US Navy's involvement in Southeast Asia. The conferees agreed upon two methods the North Vietnamese employed in infiltrating men and materiel into South Vietnam via the sea. Infiltration into South Vietnam occurred either by way of junks plying the coasts and mingling with the fifty thousand legally registered civilian craft, or the North Vietnamese relied upon more sizable oceangoing trawlers that approached the South Vietnamese coast on perpendicular courses.[103] The US Navy's effort to assist the VNN in interdicting the flow of supplies into South Vietnam via oceangoing trawlers and junks from North Vietnam became known as Operation Market Time. By the end of March,

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[101] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 81.

[102] Originally, the US Navy's Seventh Fleet had responsibility for commanding the Vietnam Patrol Force, or Task Force 71. After a few weeks of operating, the Navy designated the mission Operation Market Time; the units involved belonging to Task Force 115. In July, 1965, the Seventh Fleet transferred operational control to the Naval Advisory Group (NAG). See Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 249.

[103] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 283. See also Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 83-84.

1965, Market Time operations were underway. In May, the Government of South Vietnam granted the US Navy permission to board, search and seize any vessel not clearly involved in innocent passage or activity.[104]

Operation Market Time included an array of US Navy assets. Organizationally, the Navy divided the twelve hundred miles of South Vietnamese coastline into manageable sectors to be patrolled. For close inshore patrolling, the Navy ordered several PCFs (Patrol Craft, Fast) and even some eighty-two foot US Coast Guard cutters (WPBs). The PCFs, which came to be called "Swift boats," were aluminum-hulled adaptations of an original civilian-designed boat used to haul workers to offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.[105] The Swift boats were fifty feet in length, had a thirteen feet, six inch beam, a draft just less than five feet, and displaced twenty-two tons.[106] The Coast Guard WPBs displaced sixty-seven and one half tons, and had a draft just over six feet.[107] Both PCFs and WPBs contained a wide assortment of heavy machine guns and 81-mm

[104] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 284.

[105] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 86.

[106] Schreadley indicates a Swift boat displaced twenty-two tons and had a draft of four feet, ten inches while Cutler asserts each craft only displaced nineteen tons with a draft of three and one half feet. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 86; and Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 85. During the Vietnam War, the US Navy deployed two varieties of Swift boats: the Mark I and then the Mark II. The Mark II displaced twenty-two and one half tons with its full war load of ammunition and fuel. The Mark I displaced eighteen and one half tons empty. Perhaps the discrepancy lies in that Cutler describes an empty Mark I while Schreadley provides details about a fully loaded Mark II. See Don Blankenship, Home Page. 8 July 2006. <http://www.rivervet.com>.

[107] Again, the two authors disagree on specifications. Schreadley posits each WPB displaced sixty-seven and one half tons and had a six-feet, five-inch draft while Cutler indicates the WPBs displaced only sixty-five tons and had a five and one half feet draft. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 86, and Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 82. According to the United States Coast Guard website, the 82-foot Patrol Boats that served in South Vietnam displaced sixty tons while empty, and sixty-nine tons with a full combat load. See United States Coast Guard. 8 July 2006. <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/WEBCUTTERS/Point_Comfort.html>.

mortars. The Navy ordered eighty-four Swift boats and twenty-six WPBs for service in Southeast Asia.[108]

Operation Market Time not only included coastal patrols, but the Navy also operated further out at sea. The open ocean portion of Operation Market Time included patrolling up to forty miles offshore in order to locate any inbound trawlers that units closer to shore needed to investigate. To do so, the Navy relied on a combination of larger ships. About one dozen Radar-Picket Destroyer Escorts (DERs) operated in the South China Sea and in the Gulf of Thailand under the authority of Operation Market Time. These ships came equipped with powerful radar and communications equipment, and could stay on station for long periods of time. Oceangoing Minesweepers (MSOs) and Coastal Minesweepers (MSCs) also participated in the deep water aspect of Operation Market Time serving in a similar capacity as the DERs.[109]

The Navy also employed a variety of aircraft in the coastal interdiction campaign. P-2 Neptunes, P-3 Orions, and P-5 Marlins assisted in patrolling from the skies over the ocean around South Vietnam. These aircraft flew from Tan Son Nhut Airbase (close to Saigon), Cam Ranh Bay, Sangley Point in the Philippines, and U Tapao Airbase (in Thailand).[110] Often the flights seemed routine, but they remained an essential element of Operation Market Time as pilots could cover a wider expanse of open water and notify the navy ships on station of any suspicious trawlers. As a result of these combined

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[108] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 86.

[109] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 88-89.

[110] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 92. Also see Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 249.

efforts, the Navy, after only nine months of Market Time operations, inspected, boarded, and/or searched over one hundred thousand craft. US sailors also detained approximately two hundred junks in the first nine months of Market Time, and arrested nearly twenty-five hundred suspects.[111] By the end of 1966, the numbers had increased to 181,482 junks boarded, 223,482 inspected and 807,946 detected.[112]

With coastal patrols underway, the US Navy soon looked inland for other means of affecting the insurgency. The Bucklew Report also suggested an inland interdiction campaign designed to deny the enemy use of rivers and canals. Operation Game Warden, though not implemented as immediately as Market Time, focused on inland waters. Operations Market Time and Game Warden bore many similarities in that they both attempted to interrupt the flow of communist supplies into and within South Vietnam. Operation Game Warden differed from Market Time in that Game Warden aimed at interdicting the communist lines of communication on the inland waterways of the Mekong delta. US Navy units conducting Game Warden operations, collectively known as Task Force 116, patrolled the inland waterways to thwart the Viet Cong use of the rivers and canals as supply, communication, and infiltration routes.

In the 1960s, the Mekong delta consisted of over twenty-four hundred kilometers of navigable waterways, and had approximately four thousand canals of varying depths

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[111] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, April 1966, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[112] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, December 1966, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, V-1.

and widths.[113] The abundance of waterways to serve as transportation routes combined with the lack of paved roads and the difficulty of moving overland in the delta made the rivers and canals the obvious means of enemy infiltration and communication. Patrolling these waterways in search of an elusive and determined enemy proved to be a massive undertaking and a dangerous, demanding task.

For Game Warden operations the Navy needed a large fleet of PBRs (Patrol Boat, River). United Boatbuilders, in Bellingham, Washington, won the government contract and manufactured the first one hundred and twenty craft. The PBRs displaced just over seven tons, were thirty-one feet in length, and had a nine inch draft underway and an eighteen inch draft while sitting idle in the water. Two water-jet pumps, manufactured by the Jacuzzi Brothers, propelled each PBR. Rotating the jets steered the craft. For armament, the PBRs relied on a twin fifty-caliber machine gun located in a forward turret, and another machine gun near the bow. Amidships on either side, there was a mount for an M-60 machine gun. Also, the crew of four carried various small arms including M-16s, shotguns, and M-79 (40-mm) grenade launchers. [114]

The US Navy established Operation Game Warden on 18 December 1965. US sailors began arriving in Vietnam in February, 1966. PBRs arrived in March; and operations began in April in the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ). The RSSZ lies about twenty miles south southeast of Saigon (see Figure 2.1) and "is a large poorly drained

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[113] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 19.

[114] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 154-155. While Schreadley and Cutler agree on the draft figures for the PBRs, Schreadley does not offer a PBR displacement figure. See Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 90-91.

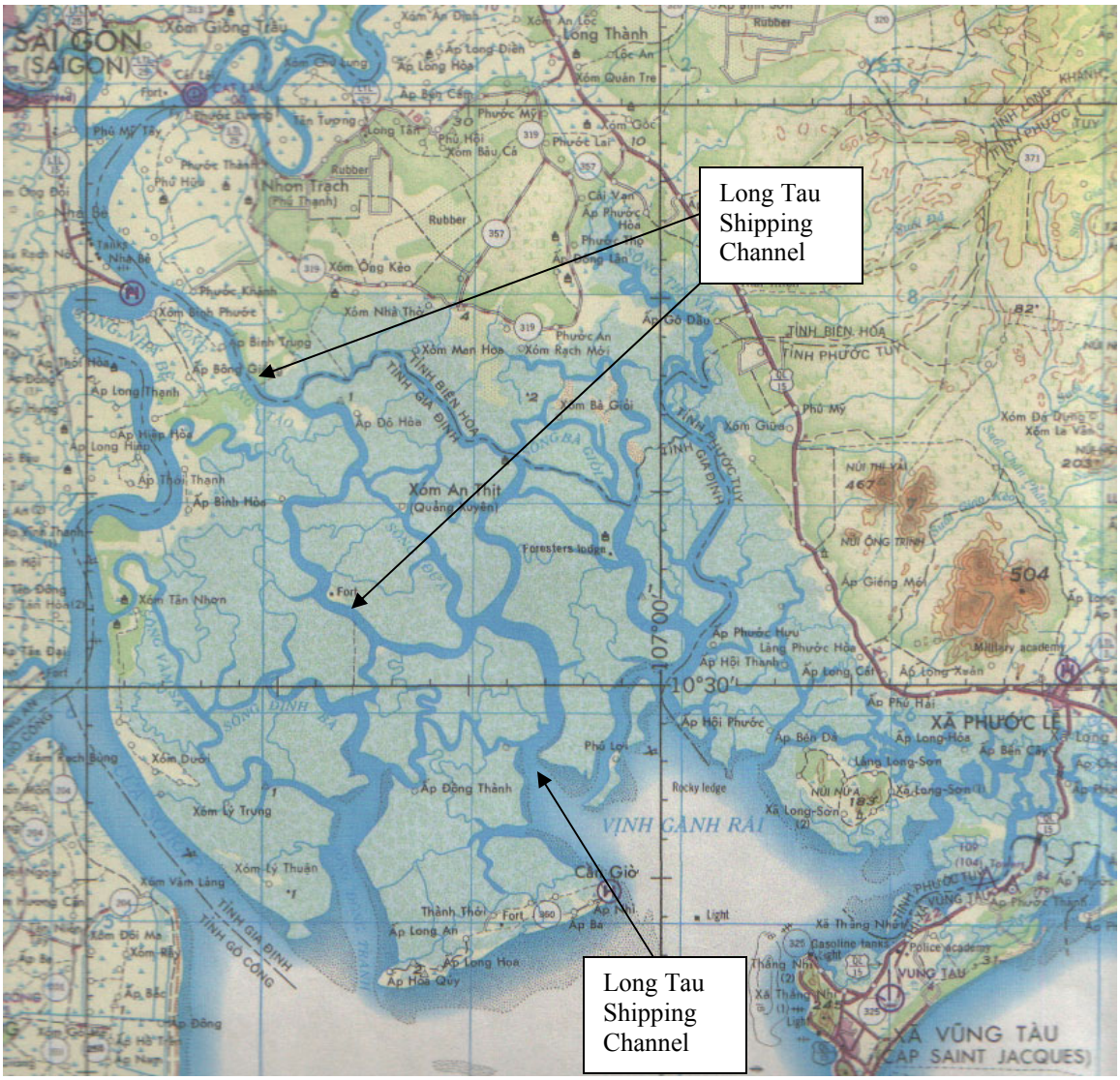

Figure 2.1 Rung Sat Special Zone

Source: Saigon, Vietnam; Cambodia. Series 1501, Sheet NC 48-7, Edition 3, Scale 1:250,000. Map Collection, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

tidal swamp covered primarily with Mangrove and Nipa Palm and includes small areas of brushwood and rice paddies."[115] The Viet Cong used the Rung Sat as a base of operations to attack freighters and other ships in the Long Tau Shipping Channel, which served as the main shipping channel between the port of Saigon and the South China Sea. The VC felt secure in the Rung Sat because the area was not conducive to either standard or mechanized infantry operations.

Game Warden operations expanded from the Rung Sat into the Mekong delta in May, 1965. In initial operations in the Mekong delta, Game Warden units operated from offshore support bases anchored in the numerous estuaries along the delta's coast. In June, Operation Game Warden abandoned the offshore bases for inland afloat bases on the rivers or shore support bases because rough seas often inhibited operations. Some operations never got underway because of the rough approaches.[116]

In eight months of patrolling throughout the Rung Sat Special Zone and in the Mekong delta, Operation Game Warden made a noticeable impact on guerrilla behavior. According to captured insurgents, defectors (known as *Hoi Chanh*),[117] special GVN agents, and aerial surveillance, the inland waterway interdiction campaign produced some desired results early. The number of guerrilla-initiated attacks dropped throughout the region, particularly in the Rung Sat, indicating VC inability to move with impunity.

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[115] Rung Sat Special Zone Intelligence Study, No date, Folder 05, Box 01, Carl Nelson Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 5.

[116] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 288.

[117] The *Chieu Hoi* (open arms) program was an amnesty program designed to encourage Viet Cong guerrillas to defect or surrender to the GVN. Enemy participants were called *Hoi Chanh*.

Also, fewer Viet Cong-initiated attacks translated into losses of materiel as a result of interdiction. The Viet Cong began to experience strains on his ability to provide materials to guerrillas.[118] Throughout the summer of 1966, PBRs continued arriving in South Vietnam, and by September, one hundred of the craft operated on the waterways of the Mekong delta and in the Rung Sat Special Zone. By the end of December, Game Warden units had boarded and/or inspected 157,899 craft and had detected over three hundred and forty thousand.[119]

In 1965, the United States Navy did not operate alone in the Mekong delta; the South Vietnamese Navy plied the same waters, albeit in a different capacity. Based on the *Divisions navales d'assaut* (French naval assault divisions, referred to as *dinassauts*) model, the South Vietnamese Navy had assumed responsibility for naval operations after the French forces left South Vietnam in 1956. Prior to their departure from Vietnam, the French Navy had created a remarkable afloat fighting force, the concept of which the Americans enhanced for their own Mobile Riverine Force, which would arrive in the delta in early 1967.

At the conclusion of World War II in 1945, when Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh army proclaimed Vietnamese independence in Hanoi, France had reasserted its colonial claim in Indochina. In order to reclaim its old colony after the Japanese departure,

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[118] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, June 1966, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 27.

[119] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, December 1966, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, VI-1.

France began gathering a portion of its military forces in southern Vietnam. Twelve hundred French soldiers, recently released from jail in Saigon after having been placed there by Japanese troops before the end of World War II, served as the initial bulk of the new fighting force. Among the French officers who arrived in Vietnam to lead the fledgling military was Commander Francois Jaubert.

French Governor General Philippe Leclerc appointed Commander Jaubert the task of organizing a French naval force in Indochina. Using whatever materials he could commandeer or capture, Jaubert went about establishing the French Navy in Indochina from the ground up. When Jaubert started, he had few men, no craft, none of the necessary onshore naval facilities, and the daunting task of preparing a navy to go to war against the Viet Minh. He wasted no time in locating junks abandoned by the Japanese; he also captured junks from the Viet Minh. Most importantly, though, he found some old rice barges, which he used to ferry soldiers throughout the delta, a very novel idea at the time.

France realized stability would not return to their old colony until they captured some key Mekong delta towns. The French army mobilized in Saigon and began the arduous march overland to My Tho and Vinh Long in October, 1945. Along the route, however, the French forces encountered some Viet Minh resistance, which, combined with the soggy Mekong delta ground, slowed their progress. When the troops, trucks and tanks finally arrived in My Tho, to their surprise they found the town already occupied by French naval infantrymen, who had arrived on rice barges a few days before. The soldiers then marched to take Vinh Long. Upon arrival they discovered more French

naval infantrymen serving as occupiers.[120] With My Tho and Vinh Long back in French hands, and Can Tho secured by the end of October, French forces could then concentrate on patrolling the interior waterways in the delta, which the French recognized as the principal lines of communication used not only by themselves, but also by the Viet Minh.[121]

Based on this initial success, Governor General Leclerc authorized the creation of a permanent infantry unit to be attached to Commander Jaubert's naval unit operating in the Mekong delta. Eventually, France purchased from the British in Singapore a number of LCAs (Landing Craft, Assault) and LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel). At the end of 1945, when the British left Indochina, they left behind several craft for the French: LCAs, LCIs (Landing Craft, Infantry), and LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank). By January, 1946, the French naval brigade in Vietnam had three thousand organic naval infantrymen to serve as assault troops for inland operations.[122]

By 1950, French naval strength in Indochina amounted to over twelve thousand officers and men. Also, since Mao Tse Tung declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October, 1949, the United States finally decided to assist the French monetarily in Indochina in their fight against communism. With some of the $15 million the United States gave in assistance, France purchased new craft and refitted others.

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[120] Charles W. Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina: Riverine and Coastal Forces, 1945-1954*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), 5-6.

[121] E.H. Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy: From its Beginnings to the Present Day*, (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1973), 346.

[122] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 8.

With the money, France bought twelve LCVPs, six LSSLs (Landing Ship, Support, Large), and forty naval aircraft. Also with the money, France refitted and updated ships already in her fleet stationed in the Far East, which included a small carrier, some destroyer escorts, minesweepers, and several other craft.[123]

The French naval mission in Indochina aimed at accomplishing several goals. The French Navy needed to control the coast to provide freedom of movement and access to the sea lanes. Also, France needed to interdict enemy use of coastal waters, and remove mines from ports and other waterways. Another aspect of the French naval strategy called for the use of aviation for patrol, strategic bombing, and direct support for French land and naval units. Finally, France needed to patrol the interior waterways and interrupt the Viet Minh lines of communication.[124]

To accomplish the last goal, Commander Jaubert created the *dinassauts*. During the French Indochina War (1946 – 1954), four *dinassauts* operated in Tonkin, working the Red River delta, while only two were deployed to the Mekong delta. The concept of the *dinassaut* emerged before the necessary craft became available to the French. Jaubert proved the feasibility of his riverine force idea after initially taking My Tho and Can Tho with troops ferried aboard whatever craft were available (the rice barges, particularly). When the French purchased the proper craft, and after refitting others, then the *dinassauts* began to take shape.

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[123] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 40.

[124] Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy*, 346.

At the height of the French Indochina War, when the *dinassauts* operated at full capacity, they each contained specific elements. The basic *dinassaut* consisted of one LSIL (Landing Ship, Infantry, Large) or one LCM for command and control, one LSSL or between two and four monitors for fire support, two to four LCMs for minesweeping, at least one LCT or LCU (Landing Craft, Utility) for assault troops, and an armed launch or motorized sampan for patrol.[125] All possessed diesel engines, shallow drafts, and some had bow ramps. The size and composition of any *dinassaut* depended upon the nature of the mission and the geography.[126] Ordinarily, a *dinassaut* consisted of twelve to eighteen ships and boats, and could lift up to a battalion of troops plus all its equipment.[127] Often, also, a *dinassaut* convoy relied on light observation airplanes known as crickets to patrol the riverbanks and warn the convoy of any enemy activity.

By 1952, near the close of the French Indochina War, the French *dinassauts* had demonstrated their versatility by performing a variety of tasks. The French in the Red River and Mekong deltas depended almost entirely on the rivers and waterways as lines of communication between their inland bases. The *dinassauts* often served also as transporters of vehicles, bulk cargo, and troops throughout the war.[128] The *dinassauts* also operated in an offensive capacity by providing fire support for the infantry. A typical *dinassaut* mission landed troops to sweep the Viet Minh toward a river crossing

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[125] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 53.

[126] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 52.

[127] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 10.

[128] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 62.

where the ships waited in a blocking formation to intercept and engage any fleeing enemy soldiers; a tactic the Americans would eventually employ.

During patrols or convoys, ambushes occurred. At the beginning of the war, the French outgunned the Viet Minh most of the time. As time wore on, however, and as the Viet Minh acquired more sophisticated weapons and employed different tactics, ambushes became more costly for the French. Throughout the war, the Viet Minh also became a more skilled fighting force. The French responded by adding more troops to each *dinassaut* and more armor to each craft.[129] Toward the end of the war, whenever the Viet Minh ambushed a *dinassaut*, the French developed the tactic of landing the troops at the Viet Minh position. Initially, this tactic led to some success against the Viet Minh. Before this new strategy could be fully explored and developed, the war ended in May, 1954, with a decisive Viet Minh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu.

The French realized early in their war against the Viet Minh that the waterways in Vietnam's deltas were of extreme importance. Protecting the water courses for one's own use and preventing the enemy from capitalizing on them remained a stated French goal from the outset of hostilities.[130] From the beginning of the war until its conclusion, the French Navy operated on the rivers in Vietnam using an assortment of craft to accomplish a significant variety of tasks. Even until the end of the war, the concept of the *dinassauts* underwent near continuous alteration while becoming more sophisticated

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[129] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 61.

[130] Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy*, 346.

tactically. "Out of the *Dinassauts*, subsequent South Vietnamese and US river groups grew."[131]

By 1954, France still had over ten thousand naval officers and enlisted men in Vietnam. France also had nearly four hundred craft, from river patrol boats to small carriers, patrolling the rivers and coasts.[132] When the South Vietnamese Navy officially formed in 1954, it consisted of fifteen hundred men and operated only a few craft. French officers, however, occupied all the important command posts.[133] When the French military departed from Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the VNN inherited many of the naval assets left behind by the French. With the leftover French craft and a fleet of native junks, the South Vietnamese Navy established the Sea Force and the River Force in November, 1955, after the American naval advisors suggested the VNN be organized into such groups. The arrival of the American navy coincided with the French departure from Vietnam. Also with the Americans came an influx of Vietnamese recruits into the navy, more American advisors, and more American-built ships and craft.

By 1960, the VNN had established six River Assault Groups (RAGs) patterned after the French *dinassaut* model. The Vietnamese RAGs, unlike the *dinassauts*, had no permanent infantry unit assigned to them.[134] The VNN remained under the command of

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[131] Koburger, *The French Navy in Indochina*, 51.

[132] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 276.

[133] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 276.

[134] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 278.

ARVN generals, who used the RAGs primarily for troop lift and base resupply shuttles. Even then, the ARVN preferred rides in American helicopters so the RAGs often escorted commercial shipping convoys or ferried RF/PF (Regional Force / Provincial Force) or CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) militiamen on operations.[135] As such, the River Force in the Mekong delta served in less than its full capacity and remained underutilized. For the first decade of its existence the VNN remained under the operational command of the ARVN, until 1964 when the Joint General Staff appointed a permanent Chief of Naval Operations position responsible for the administration and operation of the South Vietnamese Navy, and only then after the Bucklew Report recommended it.

The South Vietnamese Navy suffered severe growing pains after its inception. On 1 July 1955 France transferred command of its Far Eastern naval assets to the South Vietnamese Navy. Controversy surrounded the possibility of assigning command of the VNN to Lieutenant Commander Le Quang My, so Diem assigned ARVN Brigadier General Tran Van Don, Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, as the Chief of Staff (Navy) and Commander in Chief of the Vietnamese Navy. Vice Admiral Edouard Jozan, Commander in Chief of French Naval Forces, Far East and Acting Commander in Chief, Indochina, "threatened to withdraw all French naval personnel and logistical support assigned to the Vietnamese Navy if My assumed the command."[136] Vice Admiral Jozan

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[135] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 24.

[136] Edwin Bickford Hooper, et al., *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, Volume One: The Setting of the Stage to 1959*, (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1976), 325.

objected because Lieutenant Commander My had been accused of misappropriating funds.[137] Vice Admiral Jozan's objections aside, Diem appointed Lieutenant Commander My as the Navy Chief of Staff and Commander in Chief of the Vietnamese Navy on 20 August 1955.

The internal struggle within the VNN continued shortly after the cabal of ARVN officers assassinated President Diem and his brother Nhu in November, 1963. A lower ranking VNN officer sympathetic to the incoming regime assassinated Captain Ho Tan Quyen, the Commander in Chief of Vietnamese naval forces and a Diem loyalist.[138] Chaos in the VNN ensued for years as "careerism and political activity on the part of many naval officers weakened the war effort."[139]

What amounted to a mutiny occurred in April, 1965, when the current VNN commander, Captain Chung Tan Cang, was charged with graft.[140] Captain Cang removed all mutineers from their posts before he was replaced by Captain Tran Van Phan. One year later in April, 1966, Phan allowed the mutineers to return to their posts.[141] Political infighting, factionalism, and inept leadership continued to plague Captain Phan's administration and the VNN for the next several months until Phan was relieved of command in September, 1966. The ARVN commanded the VNN until a suitable leader could be found. Captain Tran Van Chon brought a measure of stability to

[137] Hooper, *The Setting of the Stage*, 325.

[138] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 168.

[139] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 462.

[140] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 288.

[141] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 290.

the naval service when he assumed the duties of the highest office in the VNN in late October, 1966.[142]

Political infighting, poor leadership, and factionalism, while they lasted, weakened the position of the VNN on the JGS and affected the morale of the sailors in the field. By the time Captain Chon headed the VNN, most of the damage already had made a lasting impression. Captain Chon assumed command of a navy whose morale had been suffering as a result of political maneuvering, corruption, low wages, inadequate or insufficient training and repair facilities, and a shortage of trained manpower. Due to the circumstances that plagued the VNN, it is of little wonder that the United States Navy received the VNN's responsibilities by default and soon took the lead in providing security for the GVN along the coasts of South Vietnam and in the Mekong delta with Market Time and Game Warden operations.

Realizing the political importance of controlling the Mekong delta region and its inhabitants, the GVN deployed several ARVN divisions to the area. In 1966, the ARVN had three infantry divisions stationed throughout the delta, and the VNN had six RAGs. The Seventh ARVN Division at My Tho, the Ninth ARVN Division at Sa Dec, the Twenty-first ARVN Division at Bac Lieu, plus five South Vietnamese Ranger battalions and three armored cavalry squadrons all operated in the Mekong delta.[143] South Vietnamese paramilitary units also existed in the delta. These forces included RF/PF

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[142] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 169.

[143] In 1966, this force totaled approximately forty thousand men. See Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 23.

units, National Police officers, and CIDG militiamen.[144] These paramilitary forces primarily manned outposts and watchtowers throughout the delta while the ARVN infantry divisions occupied bases. Generally, the paramilitary forces did not receive much support from the ARVN and remained poorly armed, ill-equipped, and inadequately trained. Naturally, high desertion rates existed, especially among some of the RF/PF and CIDG militia units.[145]

The Viet Cong amassed troops in the delta as well, also realizing the importance of controlling the Mekong delta's population and natural resources. Intelligence estimates indicated that by 1966 the Viet Cong had approximately eighty-two thousand men and women working in various capacities throughout the delta. United States Army intelligence estimated that nineteen thousand combat troops operated in the delta in local and main force insurgent units. Fifty-one thousand served only as part-time guerrillas, while another eleven thousand filled the ranks of the political cadres. Another thousand functioned as support troops.[146]

Recognizing a continuing threat to the security of the GVN, Market Time operations attempted to interdict the flow of supplies from the sea to the communists from sources outside South Vietnam while Game Warden operations aimed at interrupting the internal movement of communist supplies along the waterways of the

[144] The RF/PF, CIDG, and National Police force consisted of just over one hundred thousand men. See Riverine Operations in the Delta (Feb 66 – Jun 68). CHECO Report Number 178, Reel 23. Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Reports of Southeast Asia, 1961-1975, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 4.

[145] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 23.

[146] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 21. Fulton's numbers reflect the entire Viet Cong strength in the IV Corps Tactical Zone, which encompassed the Mekong delta.

Mekong delta. The US Navy did not design either of these operations to deal specifically with the Viet Cong combatants. In order to neutralize the Viet Cong threat to the GVN in the delta, another task force would have to be created. The South Vietnamese Navy RAGs, based on the French *dinassauts*, would provide the US Navy with the initial start-up capital and the on-the-job training necessary to engage in operations against the armed insurgents in the delta on a full time basis.

When the US Navy realized it would have to assume much of the responsibility for operations in the Mekong delta due to the weakness and disarray of the VNN, the service branch consolidated all Navy efforts currently underway into a single service component within MACV. On 1 April 1966, Rear Admiral Norvell Ward became Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam (COMNAVFORV). As COMNAVFORV, Rear Admiral Ward had operational control of Task Forces 115 and 116 (Operations Market Time and Game Warden), and of the Naval Advisory Group (NAG).[147] Elements of the US Navy soon began operating with VNN RAGs and learning the job of inland riverine assault.

By the middle of 1965, MACV concluded that the ARVN in the Mekong delta would merely hold the line and would not carry the fight to the Viet Cong.[148] The need for American involvement in the Mekong delta appeared greater now than ever if Saigon hoped to keep the communists from controlling the delta. In December, 1965, Brigadier General William DePuy, while on the MACV staff and before he assumed command of

[147] Riverine Warfare: The U. S. Navy's Operations on Inland Waters, 1969, Folder 06, Box 04, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11 - Monographs, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[148] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 26.

the First Infantry Division, briefed General Westmoreland on the concept of an Army brigade operating with comparable naval components from various anchorages throughout the Mekong delta. General Westmoreland liked the idea and forwarded it to Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, CINCPAC, and Admiral Roy Johnson, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), in Hawaii. As part of the concept, MACV suggested a Mobile Afloat Force consisting of one reinforced Army brigade with three infantry battalions for maneuver, one artillery battalion for fire support, and any other support elements necessary for combat operations.[149]

The Navy contributed to the initial concept of a Mobile Afloat Force by agreeing to supply, when such a force came into being, LSTs that had been converted into barracks ships during and after World War II, and then designated Self-Propelled Barracks Ships (APBs). The APBs might serve as billets for the Army elements. Rear Admiral Ward agreed that the Navy would stand ready to furnish the necessary craft should the Army wish to send troops into the delta.[150] In the final proposal, the Navy would furnish five APBs to billet troops, two LSTs for ferrying supplies to the APBs, two Harbor Tug Boats (YTBs) for salvage, and two LSTs that had undergone conversion during World War II to serve as light repair ships (ARLs). MACV also suggested in the proposal that the naval assets would form into two River Assault Groups each with the capability of lifting one

[149] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 31.

[150] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 27.

reinforced infantry battalion.[151] River Assault Groups in the American Navy soon became known as River Assault Squadrons (RASs).

Also within the concept proposal of the Mobile Afloat Force, MACV outlined various responsibilities for each participating branch of the service. MACV called the US Navy to be responsible for the messing and resupplying of all ships while the Army would service all equipment including weapons and boats. MACV also decided Army medical personnel would provide care for all Army and Navy elements involved in Mobile Afloat Force operations.[152] Since the Mobile Afloat Force plan was only in its conceptual phase when it reached CINCPAC in Hawaii, MACV did not address the details of command relationships.[153]

In late March and early April, 1966, the US Navy and elements from the First Battalion, Fifth Regiment, United States Marine Corps, conducted Operation Jackstay in the Rung Sat Special Zone. A Marine Special Landing Force operated with the USN in the Rung Sat because a battalion could not be spared from I CTZ, where the bulk of the Marines had been deployed beginning in early 1965.[154] Intelligence indicated that the Viet Cong used the RSSZ in a variety of ways. The guerrillas believed the Rung Sat was

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[151] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 31.

[152]Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 39-40.

[153] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 41. Details of command relationships between Army and Navy officers in the MRF are discussed in Chapter Four.

[154] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 348.

a secure place in which insurgents could receive medical treatment, relax and recuperate, and manufacture and repair arms.[155]

Operation Jackstay occurred in two phases: the first included a conventional beach assault while the second phase featured inland infantry sweeps to locate fixed Viet Cong bases while the patrol boats roamed the waterways to prevent the insurgents from massing or escaping. The results of Operation Jackstay impressed upon the Navy that sea power could be projected inland successfully to disrupt enemy sanctuaries and capture his stores.[156] The results of the operation also indicated to the Navy and to MACV the feasibility of the Mobile Afloat Force concept and its potential for successful Mekong delta operations.

The results of Operation Jackstay also proved the Viet Cong were a well organized force capable of conducting war on the rivers and canals in the Rung Sat Special Zone. Within one week of beginning the operation, the Marines found large caches of weapons and water mine-construction tools. From several caches, the Viet Cong lost tons of materiel.[157] From Operation Jackstay, the Navy concluded that since several VC structures and facilities were found intact, the guerrillas figured US forces could not reach their bases with helicopters and never anticipated a waterborne assault.

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[155] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 347-348.

[156] Riverine Warfare: The U. S. Navy's Operations on Inland Waters, 1969, Folder 06, Box 04, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11 - Monographs, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[157] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 359.

The Viet Cong learned that the US military was willing to seek him out in places he once believed inaccessible to his enemy, and therefore, secure.[158]

On 1 February 1966, shortly before the beginning of Operation Jackstay, the US Army reactivated the Ninth Infantry Division (ID) at Fort Riley, Kansas, under the command of Major General George S. Eckhardt. The Ninth ID remained the only infantry division reactivated during the Vietnam War.[159] Activation of the division headquarters and the brigade headquarters units occurred first. The activation of the infantry brigades was staggered; the First Brigade was activated in April, followed by the Second Brigade and the division artillery in May, and then the Third Brigade in June, 1966.[160] Upon full activation, the Ninth ID consisted of nine infantry battalions (one mechanized) organized into three brigades, plus the requisite artillery, transportation, and headquarters units.

After reformation in 1966, the Ninth ID shortened its training schedule to coincide with the annual dry season in Vietnam beginning in December, when the troops were scheduled to begin arriving. Prior to the Ninth's departure while it trained in Kansas, returning First Infantry Division veterans provided advice on operational procedures against the enemy, and discussed Vietnam's unique geography. The United States Army knew little about riverine operations in early 1966.[161] One hundred years

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[158] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 364.

[159] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 42.

[160] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 42.

[161] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 43-44.

had passed since the Army last engaged in riverine operations (during the American Civil War, 1861-1865). No official riverine operations tactical doctrine existed within the Army in the 1960s.[162] As a result, training focused on unit activity, with water specific problems to be incorporated later.

The US Continental Army Command hosted the Coronado Conference in San Diego, California, in September, 1966, which Colonel William B. Fulton, commander of the Second Brigade, Ninth ID, attended. Navy Captain Wade C. Wells, future commander of the naval component of the Mobile Riverine Force, also attended. At the conference, the Navy announced the establishment of River Support Squadron Seven within River Assault Flotilla One as a unit of the Amphibious Force, Pacific Fleet as its initial contribution to the Mobile Afloat Force.[163] The conference also emphasized the importance of training for joint Army/Navy operations in the Mekong delta. General Eckhardt appointed Colonel Fulton's Second Brigade as the Army component of the Mobile Afloat Force after Fulton returned from Coronado. Since Captain Wells and Colonel Fulton, the two future commanders of each of the service components of the MRF, had a fortuitous meeting in Coronado, establishing a working relationship when

[162] The US Marine Corps published Fleet Marine Force Manual 8-4: "Interim Doctrine for Riverine Operations" in April, 1966, and the US Navy produced Naval Warfare Publication 21: "Interim Doctrine for Riverine Operations" in April, 1968. See R. Blake Dunnavent, "Muddy Waters: A History of the United States Navy in Riverine Warfare and the Emergence of a Tactical Doctrine, 1775 – 1989." Doctoral Dissertation, Texas Tech University: Lubbock, 1998, 207-209. Dunnavent argues the Navy and the Marine Corps relied on informal riverine doctrine until the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

[163] Riverine Warfare: The U. S. Navy's Operations on Inland Waters, 1969, Folder 06, Box 04, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11 - Monographs, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. The Navy also referred to Task Force 117 as River Assault Flotilla One. River Support Squadron Seven was one of three task groups within River Assault Flotilla One (TF 117).

operations got underway the next year in Vietnam proved an easier task than might have been had their meeting at the conference not occurred.

The bulk of the Second Brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division arrived in Vietnam in January, 1967. By the time the Second of the Ninth arrived, elements of the US Navy's River Assault Force (designated Task Force 117 on 28 February 1967),[164] the Navy's component of the Mobile Riverine Force, had already undergone on-the-job training with the South Vietnamese Navy River Assault Groups. When the Second of the Ninth arrived, the unit began training with Task Force 117 in the Rung Sat Special Zone. Training for the Army troops consisted of lectures, wet net training, beaching exercises and landings, boat maintenance, and gunnery.

When the Ninth ID arrived in Vietnam, its first base was located at Bear Cat, ten miles south of Long Binh. Bear Cat served as a temporary base for the Ninth ID, as plans were already underway for the construction of a more permanent base located in the Mekong delta. Bear Cat, situated north of the RSSZ, served well as an initial location for the Ninth as its troops familiarized themselves with riverine operations with the Navy in the Rung Sat throughout January and for the first two weeks in February. The MRF began combat operations in the middle of February, 1967.

Intelligence indicated that the VC deliberately targeted merchant ships on the Long Tau Shipping Channel (see Figure 2.1, page 44). The guerrillas had attempted to attack merchant vessels and minesweepers with water mines on at least eighteen different

[164] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, February 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 36.

occasions on the Long Tau since December, 1965. Since then, two merchant ships, two US Navy minesweepers, and two VNN minesweeper motor launches had been sunk by VC water mines.[165] The Viet Cong used command detonated and time delay mines, and would often deploy them after a minesweeping patrol had passed a certain position or point. Viet Cong explosives experts could have a mine ready in the water in five to ten minutes.[166]

For operations in the Mekong delta to be successful, the Army and the Navy would have to find a quick way of working efficiently together. Thrust into combat before the completion of their joint training exercises, the service branches still had important command issues to resolve, and a supply and logistic schedule to develop, all while neither possessing every assigned craft, nor having a permanent base from which to operate. The Mobile Riverine Force experienced some operational success early in the Mekong delta due in part to the novelty of the force and the Viet Cong's unfamiliarity with its combat capabilities, mobility and firepower. The Viet Cong suffered at the hands of the MRF until they made some adjustments that only lessened the suffering. Throughout the initial joint operations, though, the Army and the Navy established a vast infrastructure system designed to support the elements of the Mobile Riverine Force.

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[165] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, February 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Appendix II, II-1.

[166] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, January 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Appendix II, II-5.

CHAPTER III

INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE

While the United States participated in the Vietnam War, not all American military personnel carried a rifle or served in a combat unit. For every soldier or sailor in the field engaged in combat, other soldiers and sailors provided support behind the lines in supply and logistics units. The ratio of support personnel to combat troops fluctuated throughout the years of American involvement in Vietnam. In 1965, at the outset of the American build-up, military officials estimated that support troops made up only twenty-five percent of the total American force in South Vietnam. By 1966, the percentage of logistics personnel increased to forty-five percent of the total American force as efforts to relieve supply congestion got underway. In 1969, at the beginning of the American exodus from South Vietnam, support troop numbers remained high at thirty-nine percent of the total US military presence. By 1971, halfway into the American drawdown, the total of support personnel peaked at forty-seven percent of the sum of the American force in South Vietnam.[167] Throughout the Vietnam War, military logisticians faced the never-ending and monumental task of ensuring the American fighting men remained stocked with ammunition, food, medical supplies, and other necessities. Logistics experts also

[167] Lieutenant General Joseph M. Heiser, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Logistic Support*. (Washington, D.C: Department of the Army, 1974), 33.

concerned themselves with supplying the mechanized combat units in the field with enough fuel, tools, spare parts, and ammunition to continue fighting.

MACV employed thousands of logisticians and supply personnel to determine and then organize what materiel each of the service branches had on hand in South Vietnam. By the end of 1967, as the troop build-up neared completion, the US had too much war materiel present in South Vietnam to be stored in an organized fashion. The build-up occurred too rapidly for the meager South Vietnamese infrastructure to handle the influx of supplies. One munitions storage facility in Saigon, known locally as the Fish Market, housed tons of military materiel in piles so high helicopters sometimes experienced difficulty landing at the depot.[168] By the end of 1966, an accurate inventory of US materiel in stock facilities, depots, and warehouses in South Vietnam could not be made.[169] By September, 1968, logistics experts reported that approximately two million tons of excess munitions existed in South Vietnam, of which only one third had been accurately inventoried.[170]

During the war, the First Logistical Command at one time counted twenty-three different pipelines, not all of them official, to various units stationed throughout South Vietnam. The 25th Infantry Division, for example, received materiel from sources in Hawaii not authorized to supply the division. Apparently, those suppliers in Hawaii knew people in the division and decided to assist the boys on the front lines. The Special

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[168] Lieutenant General Joseph M. Heiser, Jr., *A Soldier Supporting Soldiers*. (Washington, D.C: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1991), 129-130.

[169] Heiser, *A Soldier Supporting Soldiers*, 134.

[170] Heiser, *A Soldier Supporting Soldiers*, 144, 151.

Forces also had their own unofficial pipeline to units serving in South Vietnam. The 82nd Airborne Division received materiel directly from Ft. Bragg while the 101st Airborne Division got some items from Ft. Campbell, both through unofficial channels.[171] The unauthorized pipelines to South Vietnam often created mass confusion, materiel excesses, inefficiency, and waste. Still, every unit needed to be supplied, and the Mobile Riverine Force was but one of many American combat units operating in South Vietnam.

The original concept of the Mobile Afloat Force plan circumvented some supply problems by indicating that the US Army would perform certain tasks while the US Navy managed others. The Navy, for example, would assume responsibility for messing all personnel on ships assigned to the MRF. The Army would perform all medical procedures on soldiers and sailors assigned to the MRF. In some cases the two service branches cooperated in performing certain duties. For example, Army mechanics assisted Navy maintenance men in servicing and repairing all boats, signal equipment, motors, and weapons.[172] At the same time, sailors assisted soldiers with base defense responsibilities.

In order to get the necessary supplies to the units that needed them, commanders needed to know what components made up a particular unit. The Mobile Riverine Force presented a unique challenge to military logisticians in that the unit consisted of one Army infantry brigade and one Navy task force, destined to consist of scores of ships and craft. The Army had well-established guidelines already in place for supplying an

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[171] Heiser, *A Soldier Supporting Soldiers*, 158.

[172] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 39-40.

infantry brigade, but the Navy faced an unusual set of challenges in initially supplying Task Force 117 with river craft. After all, most of the riverine craft designated to operate with the MRF needed major conversions and modifications prior to service on the rivers in the Mekong delta. The Navy not only modified and provided craft well-suited for operations in the delta, but also managed to keep all groups in the task force afloat, well-provisioned, and functional throughout MRF operations.

The Mobile Riverine Force's naval element consisted of Task Force 117, also referred to as River Assault Flotilla One. The Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam enjoyed operational control in the chain of command over Task Force 117. The Commander, Task Force 117 (CTF 117) had operational control of the three river assault squadrons that conducted combat operations as a task force. For combat operations, Task Force (TF) 117 consisted of three separate task groups (or squadrons): two river assault squadrons (Nine and Eleven, also referred to as Task Groups 117.1 and 117.2 respectively), and River Support Squadron Seven, also known as the Mobile Riverine Base (Task Group 117.3). Within each River Assault Squadron, two River Assault Divisions (RADs) and one Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team existed. River Assault Squadron Nine contained River Assault Divisions 91 and 92. River Assault Squadron Eleven consisted of RADs 111 and 112 (see Figure 3.1). The commanders of each combat task group exercised operational control over the units within each group. Therefore, during combat operations the RAD commanders answered to the task group commander (CTG) who followed orders from CTF 117, who in turn answered to COMNAVFORV.

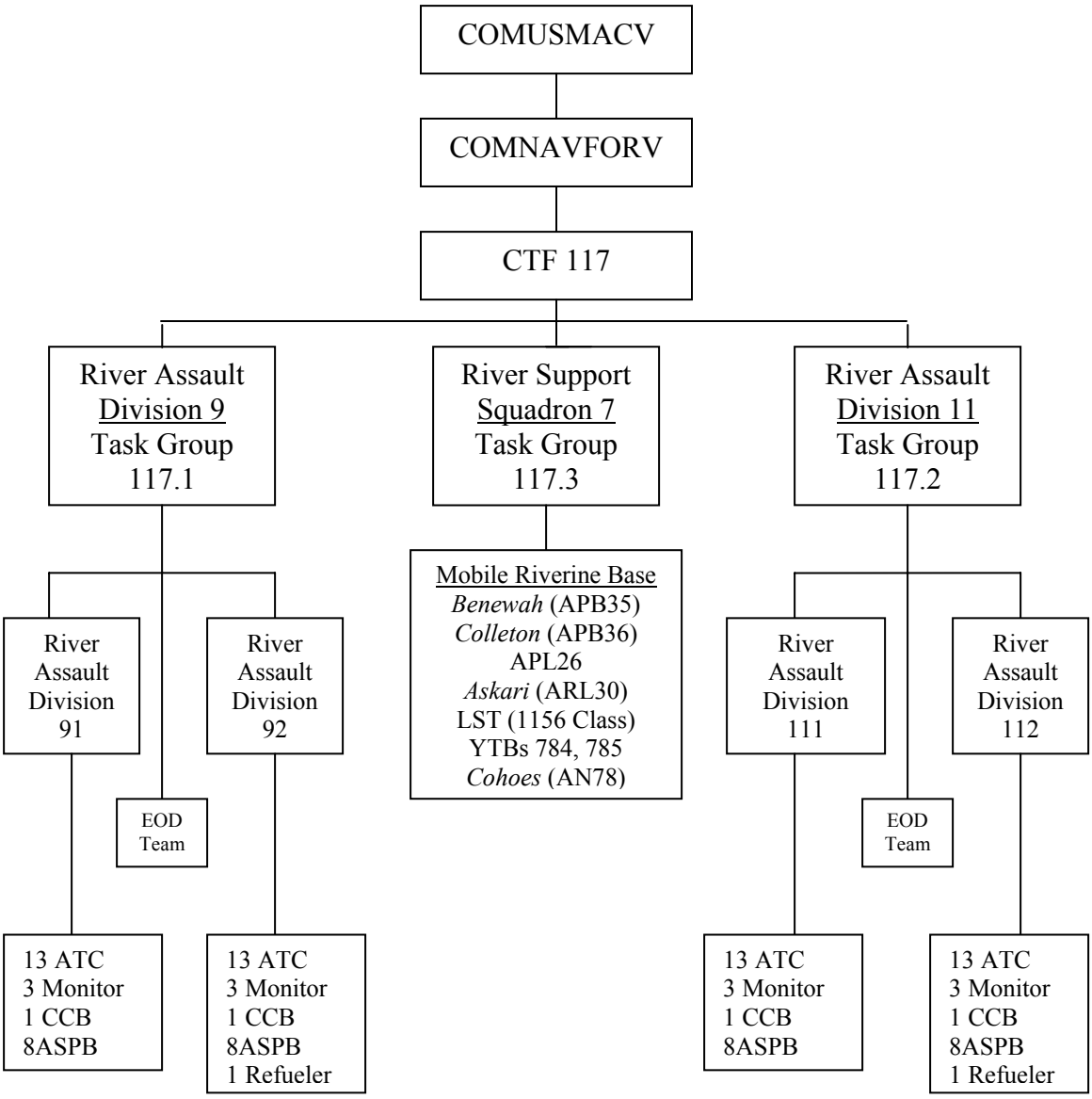

Figure 3.1 Task Force 117 Organization Chart

The Navy assigned fifty river assault craft to each River Assault Squadron. The RAS then divided the craft as equitably as possible among each of the RADs. Each RAS functioned with twenty-six ATCs (Armored Troop Carriers), two CCBs (Command Communications Boats or Command and Control Boats), sixteen ASPBs (Assault Support Patrol Boats), five Monitors, and one refueler. The River Assault Divisions received thirteen ATCs, one CCB, and eight ASPBs apiece. Whichever RAD had the refueler attached to it received only two Monitors while the other RAD in the squadron operated with three Monitors for a total of twenty-five craft within each River Assault Division (see Figure 3.1, page 69).[173]

All of the river assault craft attached to the MRF (ATCs, refuelers, Monitors, and CCBs) began life as LCM-6s (Landing Craft, Medium) with the exception of the ASPBs, which were the only American craft built from the keel up specifically for riverine operations in the Vietnam War. The Armored Troop Carriers filled the role of the workhorse of the riverine assault fleet as they performed troop lift duties and shuttled supplies to units operating in the field. These craft carried in their well decks up to a platoon (approximately forty infantrymen) or a cargo load of equal weight in ammunition, food and water, or other infantry gear.[174] Each ATC also carried at all times

[173] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 31. Also see Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105.

[174] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 106.

forty cases of C-rations as a reserve and an extra stock of all types of ammunition for the infantrymen.[175]

Each ATC retained its original bow ramp, displaced sixty-six tons, was fifty feet in length, and had a three and one-half feet draft. Each craft had a maximum speed of just over eight knots and a range of one hundred ten miles while steaming at six knots. Each ATC required a crew of seven enlisted men. Armored Troop Carriers provided close fire support for shore-bound infantrymen as troops disembarked from the craft, and also supported troops with suppressing fire as they embarked from the shore.

For armament, each ATC possessed one 20-mm cannon, two fifty-caliber machine guns, two Mark 18 grenade launchers, and whatever small arms the crew carried. The ATCs also came equipped with some defensive measures. Each ATC had a series of horizontal iron bars welded to the craft approximately one foot from the hull. If any recoilless rifle rounds or rocket propelled grenades (RPG) fired from the shore hit an ATC, the iron bars detonated the round before it struck the hull. The iron bars absorbed most of the intensity of any blast and minimized damage to the hull of the craft. Also, a canvas awning covered the well deck, which prevented hand grenades from being thrown in on the infantrymen.[176]

As riverine operations expanded, American ingenuity led to the enhancement of some ATCs in the fleet. A few ATCs had their canvas awnings replaced with helicopter

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[175] After Action Report (AAR) for Operations in the Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone, 30 June 1967, RG 472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 53, 54.

[176] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 240-241.

landing pads, which were welded onto the craft above the well deck. On 4 July 1967, the first helicopter landed on an ATC. The advantages of a helipad on an ATC became immediately obvious. Wounded soldiers and sailors could be evacuated from the field without having to spend precious time finding a suitable landing zone for a medivac helicopter. Also, infantry commanders directing action from a helicopter had a place to land near their unit if circumstances required the commanding officer's presence on the ground.[177] Extra ammunition and water could be brought to a unit in the field conveniently by landing a helicopter on an ATC. Furthermore, personnel could be shifted with relative ease, thus avoiding the often difficult task of having to locate a dry patch of ground in the Mekong delta upon which to land a helicopter and extract troops.

In order to increase unit efficiency and save lives, other ATCs became floating battalion aid stations for infantrymen and sailors wounded during riverine operations. An ATC(H) came equipped with surgical facilities in the well deck, a large stock of refrigerated blood, an Army surgeon, and either Army aidmen or Navy corpsmen. On 15 September 1967, one floating battalion aid station treated over fifty battle casualties in a single day.[178]

For service in South Vietnam, the Navy also converted LCM-6s into Monitors, which accompanied the versatile ATCs in the river assault fleet. Monitors had modifications that replaced the bow ramps with spoon-shaped prows. The Monitors

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[177] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 240-241.

[178] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Also see Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 424, and Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 241.

possessed the same armor and armament as the ATCs, but each also wielded an 81-mm mortar and one 40-mm cannon. Each Monitor, collectively known as the battleships of the riverine fleet, displaced seventy-five tons with a full combat load, was sixty feet in length, had a seventeen and one-half feet beam, and had a three and one-half feet draft. Each craft required a crew of eleven and could steam at eight knots. Eventually, some Monitors came equipped with a forward flamethrower designed to burn vegetation away from the riverbanks thus exposing any concealed enemy bunkers. These craft, ATC(F)s, earned the moniker "Zippo boat" after the popular brand of cigarette lighters.[179]

For command purposes, each River Assault Division needed one vessel to serve dually as the Navy's RAD flagship and as the Army component's floating command post. The Command and Control Boats served well in both capacities. Also converted from World War II era LCM-6s, the CCBs had their bow ramps replaced with regular prows like the Monitors. Instead of an 81-mm mortar, each CCB came rigged with an array of electronic devices such as radios and other communication equipment. CCBs also came equipped with radars, as did the Monitors. The ATCs of the MRF did not possess radars. Problems due to a lack of radar gear seldom occurred among the ATCs in the fleet because they rarely traveled without either a Monitor or a CCB. With a crew of eleven, a CCB served as an ideal Army battalion command post, as well as a Navy flagship for each RAD.[180]

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[179] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 242-244. Also see Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 106.

[180] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 244. Also see Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105-106.

One refueler, also a World War II vintage LCM-6, served an entire River Assault Squadron consisting of fifty boats. One refueler could carry up to 10,000 gallons of diesel in large fuel bladders inserted into its well deck. Though attached to only one River Assault Division of two within each River Assault Squadron, the refueler provided service to both divisions.[181]

The Assault Support Patrol Boats, known as the minesweepers and the destroyers of the riverine fleet, began to arrive in late 1967 after riverine operations had already started in the Mekong delta. With a crew of seven, each ASPB displaced twenty-eight tons, was fifty feet in length, and reached speeds of up to sixteen knots. As the only craft built specifically for the MRF, the ASPBs had stronger hulls that could withstand water mine explosions better than their riverine counterparts. The improved design allowed a hull struck by a water mine to dish in instead of blowing a hole. The ASPBs also came equipped with water mine countermeasure chain drags, as minesweeping was one of their missions. The armament of each ASPB included an 81-mm mortar, one 20-mm cannon, and an assortment of machine guns and grenade launchers. The exhaust systems of the ASPBs released exhaust underwater, thus making the craft among the quietest in the entire riverine fleet.[182]

Task Group 117.3, also known as River Support Squadron Seven, consisted of entirely different craft. Task Group 117.3 served the riverine force as the Mobile Riverine Base (MRB). The MRB initially consisted of the USS *Benewah* (APB35), the

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[181] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 242.

[182] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 425. Also see Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 244.

USS *Colleton* (APB36), and one Non-Self-Propelled Barracks Ship (APL26) to billet the troops of the Ninth ID's Second Brigade. The MRB also consisted of the USS *Askari* (ARL30), a Light Repair Ship for landing craft repair; two Large Harbor Tugboats (YTBs 784 and 785) for salvage operations and towing; one Net Laying Ship, the USS *Cohoes* (AN78), for water mine and swimmer countermeasures; and one Non-Self-Propelled Repair, Berthing, and Messing Barge (YRBM).[183]

Two LSTs serviced the MRB. One ship, a smaller LST 542-class craft of World War II vintage hauled supplies once a week from the munitions depot at Vung Tau to wherever the MRB was anchored in the delta. The other ship, a larger LST 1156-class craft, cruised with the MRB wherever it traveled. It stowed at all times a thirty day supply of frozen, chilled, and dry provisions. The larger LST also kept a ten day supply of petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL), extra ammunition, and spare parts. Each week the MRF required some one hundred eight tons of food, 120,000 gallons of POL, and one hundred sixty tons of ammunition, most of which was 105-mm artillery shells.[184]

The MRB served as a floating base from which the MRF could launch operations against the Viet Cong from almost anywhere in the Mekong delta. The Navy selected each ship that made up the MRB because each had a favorable draft and could transit and stay on station in many of the wide rivers of the Mekong delta.[185] As the MRB remained afloat on the rivers and capable of traveling dozens of miles a day if necessary, the MRF

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[183] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105. Also see Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 249.

[184] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 430.

[185] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 249.

achieved fantastic mobility while it operated throughout the region, and rarely seemed too far away from its supply source.

The Self-Propelled Barracks Ships of the MRB, the USS *Benewah* (the flagship) and the USS *Colleton*, underwent profound changes prior to service in the Republic of Vietnam. The Navy built each craft originally for service as LSTs in the Second World War. Retrieving both ships from the mothball fleet, the Navy converted them into barracks ships in July, 1966. At the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard the *Benewah* and her sister ship, the *Colleton*, underwent further alterations for service in South Vietnam to include air conditioning, a helicopter landing pad, a Tactical Operations Center (TOC) replete with all the latest communications hardware, and a coat of green paint.[186] When the APBs arrived in South Vietnam, they underwent further modifications as both received armor before being deployed into action in the Mekong delta.[187]

Self-Propelled Barracks Ships billeted eight hundred troops each, approximately one Army battalion.[188] Each APB also accommodated the personnel of one Navy River Assault Squadron and its fifty craft.[189] An APB required a crew of eleven officers and one hundred sixty-one enlisted men. Each APB could steam at a maximum speed of

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[186] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 248.

[187] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 425.

[188] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 425. Also see Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 70. This figure accounts for only Army troops and not Navy personnel.

[189] Schreadley indicates the APBs had berthing space for one hundred twenty-two officers and 1,180 enlisted men. Schreadley's figures account for one Army battalion and also include the US Navy personnel required to operate one RAS, approximately four hundred men. See Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105. For RAS personnel numbers see Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia*, (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1994), 205.

twelve knots, and was three hundred twenty-eight feet in length.[190] For armament, each APB possessed eight 40-mm cannons and eight fifty-caliber machine guns.[191]

The river craft of the RADs tied up in nests to Ammi pontoons attached to the sides of each APB. The pontoons facilitated the embarkation of troops from the MRB units to the riverine assault craft. The pontoons removed the need for the troops to load into the river craft via cargo nets. Also, the river craft tied up alongside the pontoons, thus eliminating the need to anchor the boats in the river for troop embarkation. From the Ammi pontoons, an entire battalion of infantrymen (around eight hundred soldiers) could embark onto river assault craft in approximately half an hour.[192] Expert Navy swimmers manned positions on the pontoons ready to rescue any heavily laden infantryman who fell into the river as he attempted to embark onto a riverine craft.

The Navy included another ship in the MRB package in which to billet Army soldiers. One Non-Self-Propelled Barracks Ship (APL), provided berthing space for approximately six hundred fifty men, and was two hundred sixty-one feet in length.[193] The Non-Self-Propelled Barracks Ship attached to the MRB, APL26, had no official

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[190] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105.

[191] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 248.

[192] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 427.

[193] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 248. Uhlig indicates the APL billeted six hundred twenty-five troops. See Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 425. Fulton describes the APL as having space enough for berthing six hundred sixty men. See Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 71. Schreadley, on the other hand, indicates the APL had room enough for only thirty-nine officers and two hundred ninety enlisted men. See Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105. Cutler further indicates that more room became available on the APL for berthing more men after a canvas canopy was erected on the top deck, which provided berthing space for an additional one hundred seventy-five men over the usual capacity of the APL. Even without the top deck berthing spaces described by Cutler, a sizable discrepancy still exists between Schreadley's numbers and those provided by Cutler, Uhlig, and Fulton.

name, so the soldiers and sailors referred to it simply as "the big green apple."[194] The "big green apple" always had to stay within the protective environs of the MRB as it possessed no armor. The officers and men of the MRF viewed "the big green apple" as somewhat of a tactical embarrassment, as the craft could not move under its own power. The APL had to be towed by the harbor tugboats when the MRB weighed anchor. Eventually, when another APB could be found, "the big green apple" retired to Dong Tam to serve as a permanent repair and housing facility.[195]

The MRB also operated with an attached ARL, the USS *Askari*, which also began life as an LST only to be converted during World War II. The Navy used some of these old reconfigured LSTs in South Vietnam as workshops to repair damaged river craft, and overhaul riverine craft engines. Therefore, the ARLs functioned as floating maintenance shops and river craft repair facilities. Each ARL had a crew of twelve officers and one hundred seventy-eight enlisted men, and could reach speeds of up to ten knots.[196]

General Westmoreland, Commander, MACV, and Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, originally decided the MRF required five Self-Propelled Barracks Ships for billeting troops. On 5 July 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara approved the activation and deployment of a Mobile Afloat Force to the Mekong delta based on COMUSMACV and CINCPAC parameters. Secretary McNamara, however, reduced the original requirement of five Self-Propelled Barracks Ships to only two. He also removed

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[194] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 211.

[195] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 427.

[196] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 105.

one Light Repair Ship from the original MRB package as well as a number of other salvage vessels. Secretary McNamara calculated the MRF could operate effectively with the amount of craft he authorized for activation.[197]

The occupants of the Mobile Riverine Base consisted of the sailors of Task Force 117, and the soldiers from the Second Brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division. The Second of the Ninth contained three riverine maneuver battalions: the Third Battalion, Forty-seventh Infantry (3/47), the Fourth Battalion, Forty-seventh Infantry (4/47), and the Third Battalion, Sixtieth Infantry (3/60). The Second of the Ninth also had an attached artillery battery that operated several 105-mm cannons. The Third Battalion, Thirty-fourth Artillery (3/34), commonly referred to throughout riverine operations as Task Force Six-Gun, provided artillery fire support for the three riverine maneuver battalions of the Second Brigade.[198]

A typical infantry battalion in the US Army, usually commanded by a lieutenant colonel, contains three hundred to one thousand men, and is "capable of independent operations of limited duration and scope."[199] The men of a battalion are organized into four to six rifle companies, including a Headquarters company. A rifle company, ordinarily commanded by an Army captain, has sixty-two to one hundred ninety soldiers, and contains three to five rifle platoons. A rifle platoon has an authorized strength of one

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[197] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 49.

[198] Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to the US Army and Allied Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1961-1973*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. News Books, 1981), 78.

[199] Robert F. Dorr, *Alpha Bravo Delta Guide to the U.S. Army*. (Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2003), 13.

officer and sixteen to forty-four enlisted men. Two to four rifle squads, including a heavy weapons squad, each containing about ten enlisted men, make up a platoon. A first lieutenant usually commands a platoon. Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) are usually in charge of the squads.[200]

The members of American rifle squads in the Vietnam War carried standard issue M-16 rifles. Four members of the heavy weapons squad typically carried two M-60 machine guns, making two crews. One man fired the weapon while the other man fed belt-linked ammunition into it.[201] Nine rifle companies made up the Second Brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division, three companies apiece in each of the three maneuver battalions of the Second Brigade.

Even with the space available for billeting troops aboard the barracks ships of the MRB, the Ninth Infantry Division still needed a land base to serve as a division headquarters. The Navy also needed a base in the delta to provide dry docks and more permanent facilities for riverine craft repairs larger than the ARLs could handle. Before construction could begin on a land base designed to headquarter the Ninth ID and elements of Task Force 117 in the Mekong delta, MACV had to consider multiple factors. Practical military necessity dictated a strong US presence was needed in the delta to counter the growing communist insurgency, and to secure and protect indispensable delta resources for the Saigon government. The economic and social implications of the presence of a major US military installation on the inhabitants of any

[200] For the numbers of soldiers and commanding officers of different Army units, see Dorr, *Alpha Bravo Delta Guide to the U.S. Army*, 13.

[201] For infantry weapon distribution in squads, see Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, 53.

particular region or community in the delta also had to be weighed. The various factors MACV considered before and during the construction of the base at Dong Tam indicated the US military deemed the Mekong delta a region of vital importance to the survival of the GVN.

Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang, Commanding General, IV Corps Tactical Zone, and General Cao Van Vien, Chief of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff, wanted an American brigade operating in the Mekong delta. The American Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, believed the ARVN was an adequate and preferable force for securing the delta and its resources. General Westmoreland agreed with Ambassador Lodge, but admitted ARVN forces in the delta had thus far been ineffective against the communist insurgency.[202]

The US forces needed a land base in the Mekong delta in order to assist their South Vietnamese allies in securing and protecting the region. Without a base of their own from which to operate in the delta, the Americans could not fully support the ARVN in its task of defeating the communist insurgency. American military leaders and their ARVN allies had particular strategic goals in mind when contemplating the use of Allied military forces to wage a counterinsurgency war against communist guerillas in the Mekong delta. American and ARVN military planners realized provincial capitals, other populous urban centers, and the principal lines of communication (both highways and waterways) all had to be protected from the communist threat. By keeping open the major lines of communication and protecting the delta's populated areas from guerrilla

[202] Riverine Operations in the Delta (May 68 – Jun 69). CHECO Report Number 179, 6-7.

attacks, the GVN would be able to retain control of the delta's vast human and agricultural resources.[203] To accomplish their strategic goals, the Allied forces needed to establish a substantial American military presence in the delta.

Throughout the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong were able to sever and temporarily hold some sections of Route Four, the primary highway connecting Saigon with other communities farther south in the Mekong delta. By securing parts of Route Four for themselves, the Viet Cong collected taxes in the form of rice or other agricultural products from delta residents, thus contributing to the insurgents' ability to wage a war against the Saigon government. The GVN needed to keep this vital commercial line open and secure to benefit from the delta's resources and also to sustain its war effort against the Viet Cong insurgents. As ARVN forces sometimes proved ineffective against the Viet Cong guerrillas in some parts of the Mekong delta, MACV decided US ground forces should work in conjunction with ARVN units to strike lucrative targets of opportunity when the enemy presented them, and also to assist the Allies when the Viet Cong attacked any target in the delta.[204]

As the three brigades of the Ninth ID prepared to deploy to Southeast Asia incrementally in late 1966, MACV needed an acceptable location in the delta to headquarter the division. Most of the suitable land in the delta capable of supporting large tactical units was already occupied by South Vietnamese residents or ARVN troops.

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[203] Appendices Concerning Various Vietnam War Statistics, No Date, Folder 01, Box 12, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[204] Appendices Concerning Various Vietnam War Statistics, No Date, Folder 01, Box 12, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

Building a new facility for American soldiers on existing land in the delta would inevitably displace a considerable number of South Vietnamese citizens. The Americans neither wished to generate any ill feelings and unnecessary expense caused by forced relocation of delta residents, nor did they wish to share existing space already occupied by ARVN units.

MACV commissioned US Army engineers to search throughout the delta for possible locations for a new facility. After receiving and reviewing a list of possibilities compiled by the engineers, General Westmoreland selected a location eight kilometers west of the delta town of My Tho (fifty to sixty miles southwest of Saigon) on the My Tho River branch of the Mekong River. Westmoreland then decided the new base would be called Dong Tam (see Figure 3.2). He selected the name from a list of possibilities for two apparent reasons. First, Dong Tam translated from Vietnamese into "united hearts and minds," and portrayed the spirit of cooperation between the South Vietnamese and the Americans. Secondly, Westmoreland believed American servicemen would have little difficulty remembering and pronouncing Dong Tam.[205]

At the selected location, engineers considered dredging sand and silt from the My Tho River to be used as filling material in an adjacent rice paddy. With enough landfill in place to provide a large enough surface, the Old Reliables of the Ninth Infantry

[205] Base in the Swamps, 1967, Folder 10, Box 08, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 2 – Military Operations, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Also see Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 47-48.

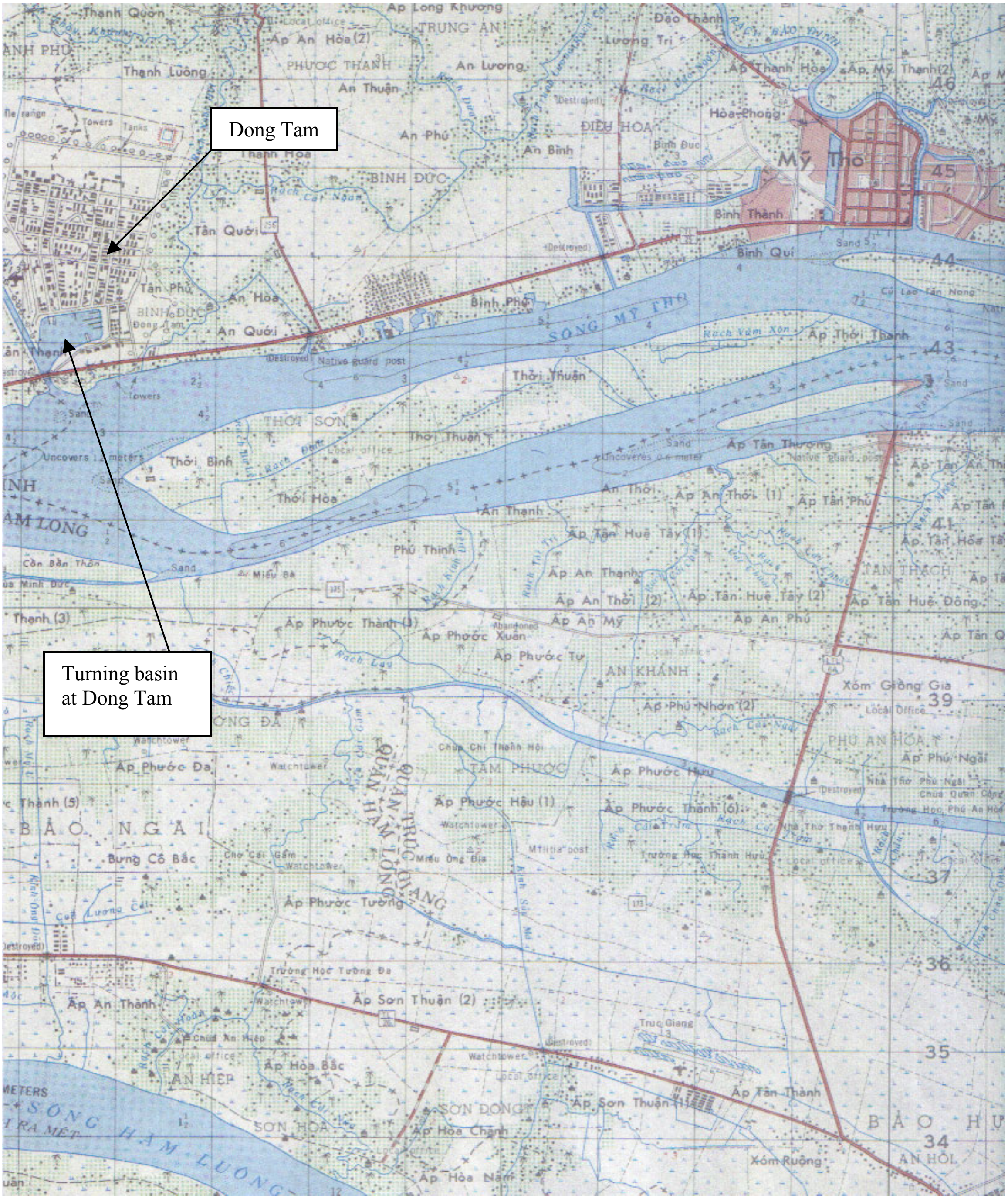

Figure 3.2 My Tho and Dong Tam Area

Source: My Tho, 6129-2 [map]. 1:50,000. L7014 Series. December, 1966. The Vietnam Archive Map Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

Division would have a dry foundation upon which a base of their own could be built. With a new facility built on what once was a rice paddy, the Ninth ID would not have to share existing space with any ARVN units, or displace any South Vietnamese civilians.

According to old French hydrographic maps of the delta available to Army engineers, enough river sand existed in the area to dredge and then use as landfill.[206] Dredging began in August, 1966. The Army engineers dredged approximately eight million cubic meters of sand from the My Tho River in the following months to provide enough filling material.[207] The river sand filled an area approximately one square mile in size; an area large enough to serve as a headquarters for the Ninth Infantry Division.[208] River water pumped into the rice paddy by a massive dredge drained off naturally while bulldozers, front-end loaders, and earthmovers pushed and heaped the river bottom muck into suitable places to provide a surface upon which to construct Dong Tam.[209] Using the eight million cubic meters of dredged sand, the engineers uplifted the area that would become Dong Tam by five to ten feet in order to prevent flooding during high tides and during the annual rainy season.[210]

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[206] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 28.

[207] Major General Roger R. Ploger, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Engineers, 1965-1970*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1974), 145.

[208] U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. Part 2: Vietnam: Lessons Learned, No Date, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[209] Dredge New Jersey Builds Dong Tam, January 2004, Folder 12, Box 01, William Foulke Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[210] Motion Picture Summaries Dong Tam Base Camp 2nd BDE 9th INF Div, 23-26 March 1967, Folder 09, Box 01, William Foulke Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

While the engineers filled one rice paddy, they excavated another one nearby and dredged enough space in it to create a turning basin for watercraft. The basin had the capacity to handle a variety of vessels and ships. Engineers from the Forty-first Engineer Battalion (Port Construction) built two LCU ramps, an LST ramp, and a pier that could accommodate two barges.[211] The basin also had the capacity to handle an LST, a sizable ship.[212] The Fifteenth Engineer Battalion also dredged an entrance channel from the My Tho River, thus completing the basin and channel in April, 1967.[213] When the engineers completed construction, Dong Tam "contained barracks, mess halls, repair shops, floating crane YD220, a C-130 airstrip, small dry docks, and waterfront facilities for the river craft."[214] Upon completion of construction and after a few improvements, the space at Dong Tam available for warehouse storage amounted to approximately 432,000 square feet. Dong Tam also provided thirty thousand square feet of hardstands and five thousand square feet of maintenance shops by April, 1967.[215]

Limiting factors and a few inherent risks existed regarding the use of the channel and harbor at Dong Tam. The floor of the harbor was only partially dredged, resulting in two different depths within the basin. Engineers dredged the side of the basin nearest the entrance channel to a depth of five meters, while the opposite half remained less than two

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[211] Ploger, *U.S. Army Engineers*, 147-148.

[212] Lieutenant General John H. Hay, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations*. (Washington: Department of the Army, 1974), 67.

[213] U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. Part 2: Vietnam: Lessons Learned, No Date, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[214] Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land*, 209.

[215] Ploger, *U.S. Army Engineers*, 147-148.

meters deep.[216] Also, the limited space in the harbor and in the port facilities at Dong Tam directly impacted the number of vessels able to moor there. The rectangular harbor at Dong Tam measured approximately six hundred fifty yards by four hundred yards.[217] Over time, some silting occurred in the entrance channel, which limited accessibility. The most obvious risk associated with Dong Tam, however, was that it existed in hostile territory and was susceptible to enemy mortar and rocket attacks at any time of the night or day.[218]

The officers at MACV considered the military situation in the Mekong delta grave enough to warrant the construction of the base at Dong Tam, despite all the inherent risks and costs. The Viet Cong quickly realized the Americans were building a base from which to impose their will, and the will of the GVN, in the Mekong delta. Also, the Viet Cong, judging by the immensity of the construction project at Dong Tam, understood the Americans were going to be stationed in the delta for a long time to come.[219] Shortly after construction got underway, the Viet Cong took measures to inhibit the progress of the American engineers.

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[216] Pilot Guide Mekong Delta, First Edition, 1967, Folder 01, Box 02, Robert Whitehurst Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 23.

[217] Pilot Guide Mekong Delta, First Edition, 1967, Folder 01, Box 02, Robert Whitehurst Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 23.

[218] Description of Various Port Facilities in South Vietnam, 14 September 1969, Folder 03, Box 01, Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) Collection: Unit Histories – 1st Aviation Brigade, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[219] Base in the Swamps, 1967, Folder 10, Box 08, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 2 – Military Operations, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

In January, 1967, Viet Cong sappers crippled a thirty-inch pipeline cutterhead dredge, the *Jamaica Bay*, with a water mine. Two US servicemen died as a result. The forty year old *Jamaica Bay* came to rest on her side in the river and needed to be removed by March as the dredge *New Jersey* was scheduled to arrive then.[220] During the subsequent salvage operation, the Ninth ID provided spotters onboard salvage vessels to direct 105-mm artillery strikes against possible Viet Cong positions in the area.[221] Salvage crews from the Navy's Harbor Clearance Unit One finally raised the *Jamaica Bay* on 8 March 1967; four days later she was taken under tow to Vung Tau, bound for the repair facility. En route, though, she encountered heavy weather with twenty-five knot winds and eight foot seas. As a result of the rough seas, the *Jamaica Bay* sank in thirty-six feet of water ten miles southwest of Vung Tau. The Navy decided not to engage in further salvage efforts, as they seemed unlikely to succeed. The Navy abandoned the *Jamaica Bay*, leaving her to rest finally at the bottom of the South China Sea.[222]

Even though Viet Cong saboteurs destroyed another dredge, the *Thu Bon I*, later in July, 1968, Army engineers encountered problems other than hostile VC sappers. While operating, a twenty-seven-inch dredge, the *Sandpumper*, extracted unexploded ordnance from the My Tho River. The ordnance detonated, destroying the dredge.

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[220] Edwin Bickford Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance: A Story of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War, 1965-1968*, (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1972), 211.

[221] Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance*, 212.

[222] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, March 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

MACV decided raising the dredge from the river and repairing her would be too expensive, so she was stricken from the registry of naval vessels and turned over to the proper military authorities for demolition.[223]

Aside from not wishing to force the relocation of delta residents, MACV also had to consider any other possible economic and social implications that went with billeting a large number of American soldiers and sailors in the populous Mekong delta. Immediate economic disruption caused by an influx of American fighting men concerned MACV. American servicemen would be able to pay higher prices for goods and services in the marketplace than the average delta villager. Some at MACV worried this would drive up prices. Before occupying the base at Dong Tam, MACV made arrangements to ensure that local prices for goods and services in the nearby town of My Tho did not become destabilized. To counter any possible economic disturbances in the community's marketplace, General Westmoreland ordered My Tho off limits to American servicemen, and also restricted troop travel through the town.[224]

Restricting access to My Tho also decreased the social impact the sudden introduction of a large body of American troops would have on the community. Prior to the arrival of the American soldiers and sailors, many local Vietnamese feared their children might begin to imitate the ways of the Americans and discard some of their traditional Vietnamese modes of behavior. Also, delta locals felt concern about the possible interaction between Vietnamese women and American servicemen. At the same

[223] U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. Part 2: Vietnam: Lessons Learned, No Date, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[224] Fulton. *Riverine Operations*, 47.

time, American troops destined for the delta received instructions about showing the proper respect for religious shrines and Vietnamese elders, should they ever find themselves in a situation involving either.[225]

The instructions came in the form of the Personal Response Project, spearheaded by Commander R.L. Mole, a Navy chaplain, at the request of the commanding officer of the Service Force, Pacific, in September, 1967. Commander Mole worked in the offices of Naval Support Activity, Saigon (NSAS), and prepared to gather cultural information about the religious beliefs and the value systems of the indigenous people of the Mekong delta. He generated and then distributed questionnaires not only to American servicemen but also to Vietnamese residents in the Mekong delta. Commander Mole designed the questionnaires to "identify positive and negative cross-cultural attitudes, and favorable and unfavorable cross-cultural interactions."[226] He then devised instructional programs designed to assist the American servicemen in better understanding the behavior and mannerisms of the people of the Mekong delta, their belief systems, and other aspects of South Vietnamese society and culture. By taking a few simple preliminary precautions, MACV reduced possible economic and social disruptions that might have occurred in the delta after American soldiers and sailors began arriving there in large numbers.

Despite the logistical quagmire that plagued the American forces early in the Vietnam War, and despite the tremendous effort required to untangle it, military logisticians persevered in supplying the combat units with enough materiel to sustain

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[225] U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. Part 4: Vietnam: U.S. Senior Officer Debriefing Reports, No Date, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[226] Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance*, 152.

them in the field and ensure their continued effectiveness. Outfitting the Mobile Riverine Force with the requisite river craft and support ships, despite the necessary alterations to virtually every craft, however, was not an insurmountable problem for the US Navy. The Navy knew what craft it had available for duty in South Vietnam, and what craft needed particular modifications for assault force service with the Army on the rivers and canals of the Mekong delta. Also, before riverine operations ever began, the Army and the Navy had plans in place to keep the ships of the MRB well stocked with the necessary stores of food, fuel, spare parts, and ammunition. Furthermore, the two service branches formulated a plan to keep an LST moving supplies once a week from Vung Tau to the MRB wherever it dropped anchor in the Mekong delta.

With the establishment of a protocol that dictated the requisite number and types of craft and infantrymen necessary to conduct riverine operations in the Mekong delta, the MRF prepared to go to war against the Viet Cong in early 1967, when the Second Brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division arrived in South Vietnam to operate with Task Force 117. The arrival of the Second Brigade coincided with the completion of riverine training exercises conducted by Task Force 117 with the South Vietnamese Navy. Throughout the initial riverine operations, Army engineers from the 15th, the 41st, the 577th, and the 169th Engineer Battalions busied themselves with the construction of a land base from which the MRF could also operate.[227] The base at Dong Tam provided the

[227] For engineer units that participated in the construction of Dong Tam, see Ploger, *U.S. Army Engineers*, 145.

MRF with a place to conduct major repairs to damaged craft. Dong Tam also served as a location for the headquarters of the Ninth ID.

One aspect of joint operations that MACV did not address in the initial concept plan of the MRF was command responsibilities and relationships between the two participating service branches. Instead, MACV focused on providing the infrastructure necessary for the MRF to operate, such as the base at Dong Tam. Even after MACV decided what the composition of the MRF would be, and after all the necessary river craft had been allocated and converted for riverine service, the issue of command relations between the two service branches had not been fully resolved. Ultimately, the resolution came from the establishment of close working relationships under demanding conditions between the officers and men in the Army and Navy components of the Mobile Riverine Force.

CHAPTER IV

MRF OPERATIONS

The command and control relationships within the Mobile Riverine Force demanded close coordination between Army and Navy officers at several different echelons of command, a determination and willingness on the part of those officers to remain flexible, and some finesse. The junior officers and enlisted men operating in the field often reflected the mutual cooperation between the officers at the top command levels within the MRF structure. Ordinarily, the US Army in Vietnam contrived its own operations independent of those the Navy planned, and vice versa. In the Southeast Asian theater, both service branches conducted entirely different missions. In the parameters of one of its assignments, the Navy's carrier force projected its power inland from "Yankee Station" in the Gulf of Tonkin by interdicting enemy lines of communication and bombing industrial and military targets in North Vietnam. The Army, on the other hand, engaged in a counterinsurgency land war against an elusive, determined, and hostile enemy throughout South Vietnam.

Despite the inherent differences between some of the Army and Navy missions in Vietnam, both branches, when called upon to conduct joint operations, found a way to combine strengths and create the formidable Mobile Riverine Force to operate against a common enemy in the Mekong delta. Since elements of the Army and the Navy both worked within the same unit, both units had to abandon independent operations planning when formulating MRF mission plans. Before any MRF operation could get underway,

and before the Mobile Afloat Force concept as a whole could be tested in the field, both service branches had to organize and then agree upon a set of reliable command relations. The mechanics of some command relationships became obvious in early operations; however, other aspects required more thought, trial, and creativity.

General Westmoreland, Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, controlled the US Army mission in Southeast Asia from the MACV headquarters in Saigon. For command and organizational purposes, MACV divided South Vietnam into four different Corps Tactical Zones. An ARVN lieutenant general commanded RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) units in each of the four CTZs. The United States deployed a corps-sized American force into each of the first three CTZs to support the local RVNAF. Near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the First Marine Expeditionary Force (IMEF) operated in the five provinces of northern South Vietnam, or I CTZ. The US deployed I Field Force, Vietnam (IFFV), into the mountainous provinces of the Central Highlands, referred to as II CTZ. II Field Force, Vietnam (IIFFV), operated in the Capital Military District and in the ten provinces surrounding Saigon, known as III CTZ (see Figure 4.1). The US also fielded the division-sized Delta Military Assistance Command (DMAC) into IV CTZ, which consisted primarily of the sixteen provinces of the Mekong delta (see Figure 4.2).[228] The Commanding General, IV CTZ, commanded DMAC and also served as the Senior Advisor, IV CTZ.[229] MACV possessed and

[228] John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 41.

[229] Riverine Operations in the Delta (May 68 – Jun 69). CHECO Report Number 179, 15.

Figure 4.1 III Corps Tactical Zone

Source: South Vietnam Provincial Maps, September, 1967, Box 1, Folder 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 10 – Small Maps, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

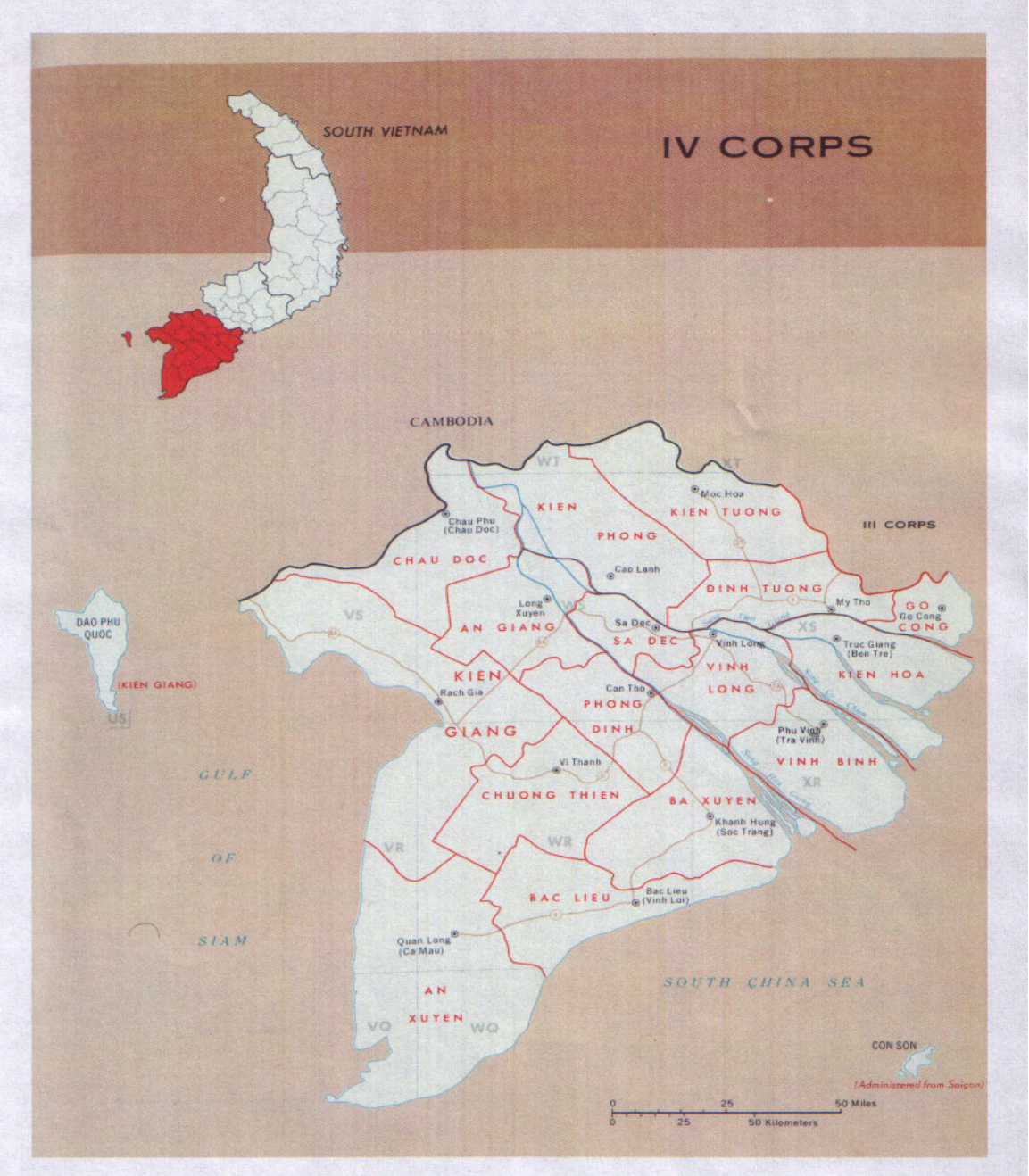

Figure 4.2 IV Corps Tactical Zone

Source: South Vietnam Provincial Maps, September, 1967, Box 1, Folder 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 10 – Small Maps, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

exercised operational control from Saigon over the entirety of US military forces serving in each of the four CTZs throughout the Republic of Vietnam.

The Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral Sharp, oversaw all naval operations in Southeast Asia from the CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii. Operational control of the Navy in Southeast Asia belonged to CINCPAC, but Admiral Sharp delegated operational control of the naval component of the MRF to COMNAVFORV, a subordinate command under the operational control of MACV.[230] Originally, General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV, proposed the joint Army-Navy unit be commanded by the assistant commander of the Ninth Infantry Division, who would possess a small joint staff consisting of operations, logistics, and communications personnel. Admiral Sharp in Hawaii disagreed with General Westmoreland in Saigon, as he preferred operational control of the MRF's naval assets be exercised by the commander of the River Patrol Force (Task Force 116). In 1966, prior to the arrival of the Ninth ID, General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp reached a compromise solution in which the Navy would mutually support the Army while Army units conducted riverine operations in III- and IV CTZs under the operational control of the Commanding General, IIFFV (CG IIFFV).[231]

With this resolution, COMUSMACV and CINCPAC easily agreed on the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directive that defined the guidelines for mutually supporting components of the same unit. The JCS directive indicated that when two forces operated

[230] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 85.

[231] Major General George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control, 1950-1969*. (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974), 78.

jointly, the supported force exercises direction over the supporting force within the limits of practical and acceptable tactics. "Such direction includes designation of targets or objectives, timing, duration of the supporting action, and other instructions necessary for coordination and for efficiency."[232] Therefore, on MRF operations, the Navy's river craft supported the Army's infantrymen. Naval support consisted primarily of troop lift to an area of operations (AO), supply deliveries, close-range fire support, and occasional medical evacuation for wounded soldiers.

The compromise solution reached by COMUSMACV and CINCPAC acknowledged the equality of rank between the two service branches at the top levels of command within the MRF. For example, by the time the Navy designated its component of the River Assault Force as Task Force 117, COMNAVFORV exercised operational control over the unit from his headquarters in Saigon. COMNAVFORV also exercised command over the other Navy Task Forces operating in South Vietnam (specifically TF 115 conducting Market Time operations and TF 116 engaged in Operation Game Warden). COMUSMACV had operational control over COMNAVFORV, as well as over the Commanding General, IIFFV, who controlled Army units at the corps level in III CTZ. The Commanding General, IIFFV, Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman, and COMNAVFORV, Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, both exercised operational control over their respective elements of the MRF, and were located one tier under COMUSMACV in the MRF command structure (see Figure 4.3). This arrangement allowed CG IIFFV and COMNAVFORV to designate operational control of the MRF to

[232] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 86.

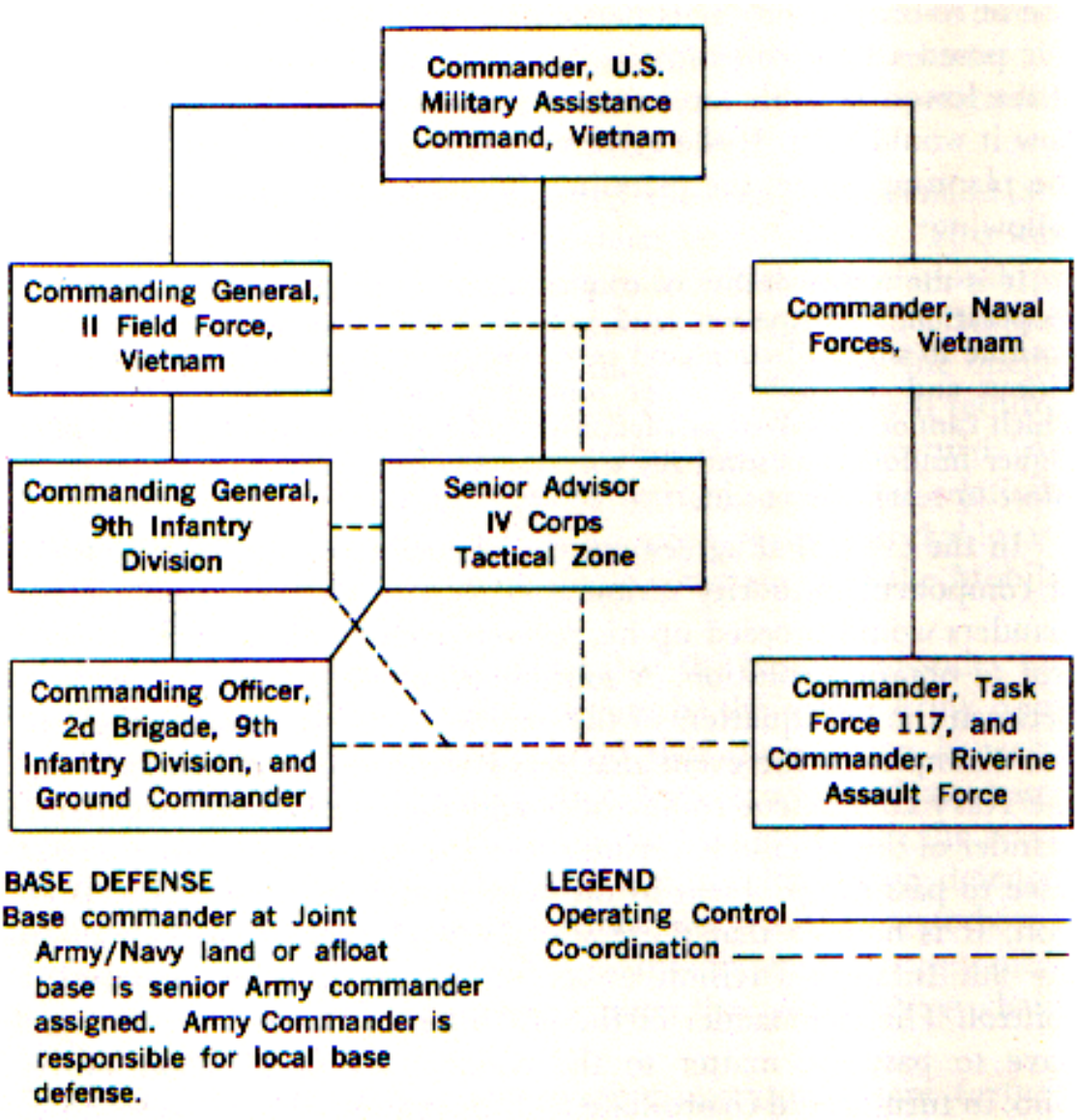

Figure 4.3 Mobile Riverine Force Command Structure

Source: Major General William B. Fulton, *Vietnam Studies: Riverine Operations, 1966-1969*. (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 88.

subordinate headquarters under their commands. Throughout the chain of command within both service branches, officers and their staffs worked closely to plan and coordinate MRF operations, then mutually support each other while their units conducted those operations. As a result, the MRF, as a joint unit, had no single commander.

As no Army corps existed in the Mekong delta (only DMAC, the division-sized unit), MACV exercised direct command over DMAC. The Commanding General, DMAC, (CG DMAC) Brigadier General William D. Desobry, wore two hats. His assignment as CG DMAC required him to serve also as the Senior Advisor, IV CTZ. Before the Ninth ID settled at Dong Tam in IV CTZ, it resided at Bear Cat, north of the Rung Sat Special Zone, in III CTZ where it came under the operational control of Lieutenant General Seaman, CG IIFFV. After moving to Dong Tam, Brigadier General Desobry, the Senior Advisor, IV CTZ, entered into the MRF chain of command. In December, 1966, MACV, foreseeing future confusion within the MRF command structure, designated operational control of the Army's MRF component to Lieutenant General Seaman, CG IIFFV, in MACV Planning Directive 12-66.[233] Brigadier General Desobry, then, no longer had operational control of the Army section of the MRF, but provided coordination and mutual support for the unit while it operated in IV CTZ. Some confusion could not be avoided and continued to linger well into 1968 as the MRF operated in both III- and IV CTZ. As the Second of the Ninth and TF 117 operated

[233] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 85.

primarily in IV CTZ after the Tet Offensive subsided in the delta in late February, 1968, some of the confusion over MRF command and control abated.[234]

Furthermore, the joint command compromise solution allowed for equality of rank between the involved service branches at mid-levels of command. For example, while the MRF operated, Army battalion commanders and Navy RAS commanders exercised equal responsibility over their units across similar lines within the MRF command structure.[235] At lower levels of command, however, some inequality existed. Infantry company commanders and RAD commanders usually did not share equal rank. Infantry company commanders and platoon leaders were commissioned Army officers while individual boat captains in each RAD were usually enlisted petty officers in the Navy. Sometimes, individual boat commanders in a RAD did not have the authority to make certain decisions. As a result, higher ranking officers often planned operations at the brigade and task force level, which included an Army colonel and a Navy captain and their staffs.[236]

During initial operations, some confusion arose about who commanded on board the ATCs while the infantry was aboard. An Army lieutenant commanded an embarked platoon of infantrymen, but an ATC often was captained by a petty officer, an NCO in the Navy. Eventually, after only a short period of time, the issue resolved itself. While

[234] Riverine Operations in the Delta (May 68 – Jun 69). CHECO Report Number 179, 15.

[235] Uhlig, *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, 429.

[236] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 94.

the ATC was in motion, the boat captain exercised control of the craft and his crew while the lieutenant maintained command over his platoon.[237]

Occasionally, the joint command structure of the MRF caused some frustration, particularly for the Navy. In the Navy, no equivalent office existed to correlate with that of the Commanding General of the Ninth Infantry Division, Major General Eckhardt. Within the MRF command structure, Major General Eckhardt's office lay between that of CG IIFFV and the commander of the Ninth ID's Second Brigade. In the MRF command structure, the Commanding General, IIFFV, and COMNAVFORV shared equality of rank under MACV within their separate service branches. Lieutenant General Seaman, CG IIFFV, commanded the Ninth ID's commanding general (Major General Eckhardt), who in turn had command over the Second Brigade's commanding officer (CO), Colonel William B. Fulton. Within the Navy, no equivalent office existed in the MRF command structure between COMNAVFORV and the Commander, TF 117 (CTF 117), Captain Wade C. Wells. COMNAVFORV exercised direct command over CTF 117. Captain Wells and the Second Brigade's CO, Colonel Fulton, shared equal rank in the MRF command structure and in their respective service branches, as well as command over their branches' elements of the MRF. The frustration for the Navy lay in the extra office between CG IIFFV, and the CO of the Second Brigade (see Figure 4.3, page 99). River Assault Flotilla One (TF 117) wanted to coordinate only with the Second Brigade of the Ninth ID, not the First and Third Brigades. Major General Eckhardt's staff, however, on

[237] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 86.

occasion sent orders to Captain Wells that involved the First and Third Brigades, and not the Second.[238]

Aside from any initial confusion and occasional frustration, the MRF managed to plan and execute operations against the Viet Cong insurgents in the Mekong delta that yielded remarkable success. The planning of operations, however, did not remain devoid of some friction between the service branches. Operations planners selected where the MRF would operate, which units would participate in a particular mission, and what the target should be. Agreement had to be reached at the lowest levels of operations planning within the MRF command structure before any missions could get underway. If an agreement could not be reached between Colonel Fulton's and Captain Wells' staffs, then the decision was passed up each component's respective chain of command until the problem reached higher parallel echelons and the decision became finalized. In theory, then, CG IIFFV and COMNAVFORV might have had to settle some planning differences and provide direction to their respective subordinate headquarters before an MRF operation could get underway.[239]

During the operations planning phase, both Army and Navy staffs worked on gathering intelligence prior to MRF missions. The Navy intelligence officer (N-2) and his staff compiled data that affected the naval units involved in any mission. The N-2 operations intelligence reports consisted of items of particular interest to the Navy. The N-2 staff primarily gathered waterway data and information regarding possible enemy

[238] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 87.

[239] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 87.

threats to any riverine craft. Waterway intelligence included a wide range of details regarding river and canal entrance and intersection locations, suitability of beaching areas, any obstructions along selected routes such as wrecks or sandbars that may interfere with passage, transit distances, bridge clearances, and the widths and depths of streams at various tidal stages.[240] With two high tides and low tides per day, the Navy's intelligence staff realized "all riverine operations in the delta must be planned with an eye on the influences of the tide."[241] Tides also affected bridge clearances and the rates at which some of the currents flowed, which would directly impact the speed of riverine craft and of the MRB.

The N-2 also included in standard operations intelligence reports any data regarding threats to naval assets participating in operations. Warnings for water craft contained in intelligence reports included the known locations of any bunker complexes in riparian zones, the possibility of water mines if an increase in swimmer/sapper activity in any area had been detected, and the firepower the enemy might be able to bring to bear against a riverine convoy. After an initial adjustment period, and even prior to the Tet Offensive, the enemy possessed the ability to attack riverine craft with automatic weapons or small arms, recoilless rifles, and B-40 rockets.[242]

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[240] MRF OPORD 42-68, 30 April 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, 47th Military History Detachment, Riverine Operations Studies, Operation Orders: February 1968 – June 1968, Box 5, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, A-1.

[241] AAR for Operations in the Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone, 30 June 1967, RG 472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 46.

[242] MRF OPORD 42-68, 30 April 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, 47th Military History Detachment, Riverine Operations Studies, Operation Orders: February 1968 – June 1968, Box 5, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, A-1.

The Army intelligence officer (S-2) and his staff tended to focus on details that pertained more to the Army units involved in any MRF mission. The Army's MRF intelligence staff concerned itself with information necessary to conduct ground operations with an infantry brigade in the Mekong delta. During the operations planning phase, the S-2 gathered data on where the Viet Cong might be located, which of the delta VC units had been observed in a particular area (a Provincial Mobile battalion or a Main or Local Force battalion), and in what numbers. The size and strength of existing Viet Cong battalions and regiments in the delta, and the possible formation of any new enemy units, also occupied the S-2 and his staff. What weapons the guerrillas possessed, and what their uniforms consisted of concerned the Army S-2 as well.

The S-2 staff also speculated on what the insurgents were doing in any particular area, as well as what they was capable of doing. The S-2 wanted to know whether the Viet Cong were resting and recuperating, moving supplies, or collecting taxes. Often, VC behavior in the Mekong delta led the S-2 to believe the enemy frequently engaged in recruiting among the rural population, training new guerrillas and cadre, transporting munitions, manufacturing and repairing weapons, and proselytizing among the civilian residents in an effort to undermine GVN authority in the delta. At one point early in March, during the Tet Offensive of 1968, the S-2 found evidence to support a belief that the VC were counterfeiting money in order to disrupt South Vietnam's economy, thus further discrediting the Saigon government.[243]

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[243] Intelligence Bulletin 15-68, 8 March 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Military History Detachment, Riverine Operations Studies, Situation Reports, Box 2, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

After the intelligence had been gathered and after the operations planning phase, which included both Army and Navy officers agreeing on a particular target or set of targets, which units to utilize, the AO, and the duration of the mission, the selected MRF units prepared to deploy. An ordinary MRF operation often called for one of the three maneuver battalions of the Second Brigade to be loaded from the barracks ships of the MRB onto the ATCs of one TF 117 River Assault Division. During a typical operation, an infantry battalion of the MRF fielded three or four companies, each containing at least three platoons. At one platoon per ATC, a RAD with its thirteen available ATCs could easily transport an entire infantry battalion (usually no more than twelve platoons) for field operations. The ATCs, escorted by other ATCs, Monitors, ASPBs when they became available, and one CCB, then steamed to a designated area of operations. Upon arrival at the disembarkation point in the AO, the ATCs, escorted by the Monitors, would nose onto the selected beach, lower their bow ramps, and offload the infantry.

During combat operations, in order to maintain Army unit cohesion, the riverine craft of Task Force 117 deposited troops onto beaches according to companies. Since one ATC carried only one platoon of at least three in an infantry company, the three ATCs carrying the three platoons of one company beached near one another in order to maintain infantry company integrity. Not all companies, however, disembarked at the same time and/or place. One or two companies in the battalion might be deployed in another section of an AO in order to set up a blocking position into which another company might attempt to flush any insurgents in the area.

On some occasions, one company remained afloat with the naval task group serving as a reserve force ready to be deployed at a position to be determined later after contact with the enemy had been established. Often, the river craft of TF 117 provided a block at known or suspected river crossings to ambush any VC elements fleeing from the American infantrymen (see Figure 4.4). On nearly all occasions, the MRF fielded a large force hoping to tempt the guerrillas into an engagement with the belief they could inflict heavy casualties on the Americans.[244]

In transit on the rivers and canals, the Navy craft maintained Army unit cohesion. The ATCs carrying the platoons of one company would often ride near one another and would offload platoons at the same beach at as close to the same time as conditions would allow, thus ensuring company cohesion and reducing confusion among the infantry units. The companies of the battalion then would often conduct a search and destroy operation over a two day period before being reloaded onto the ATCs at a predetermined time and place for a ride back to the Mobile Riverine Base where the troops would dry out, conduct equipment maintenance, and refit prior to their next operation.

Each craft assigned to an MRF operation had a specific role within the tactical riverine column once the convoy got underway. Monitors provided security for the infantry-laden ATCs as they transited the rivers and canals of the Mekong delta, and as they disgorged their loads of infantrymen onto beaches. Assault Support Patrol Boats,

[244] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 94.

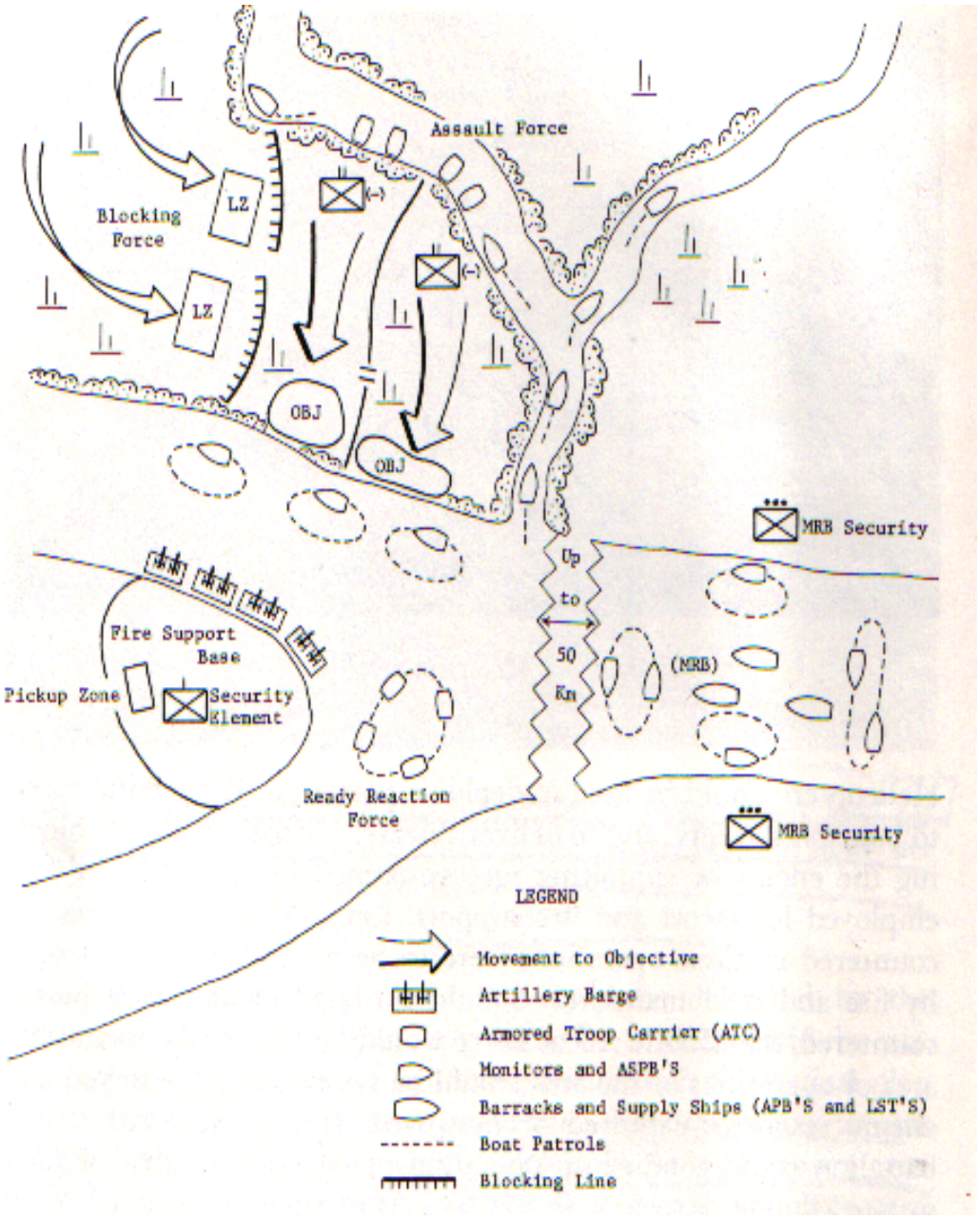

Figure 4.4 Riverine Operations and Base Defense

Source: Major General William B. Fulton, *Vietnam Studies: Riverine Operations, 1966-1969*. (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 38.

once they arrived in South Vietnam, served as minesweepers during river transits. Often these craft aligned themselves on either flank of the riverine column where they swept for command-detonated mines. Assault Support Patrol Boats both moved fast and had tremendous firepower capabilities. When a riverine column was attacked, the ASPBs returned fire to suppress any enemy resistance from river banks until other craft could arrive to provide more support. The CCB usually took up a position somewhere in the middle of the riverine column, where it could direct the transit, the disembarkation of the infantry, and the remainder of the mission's requisites.

In addition to fire support from the various naval vessels attached to the MRF, the infantry, while on operations in the field, also enjoyed fire support from its attached artillery batteries. Reliable artillery support for a body of infantrymen operating in Vietnam remained indispensable throughout the war. Often artillery support at an exact time and location meant the difference between life and death for troops in the field. Ordinarily, throughout the countryside of South Vietnam, artillery units carved small spaces out of the jungle in order to place their artillery pieces in positions to support infantry. The resulting fire support bases (FSB) usually had easy names to remember. On many occasions, the troops built fire support bases on tops of hills or other strategic places from which infantry units in the area could be supported by heavy artillery. The Mekong delta presented a unique problem for artillery batteries because there were no elevated positions, and most of the region was inundated for a long period during every year. The soggy delta swampland often did not offer a surface good enough to build

FSBs for the infantry units of the MRF. Rather than go without artillery support, the MRF experimented with a variety of different fire support plans.

The original MRF concept called for supporting artillery to be towed by watercraft into an AO, and then offloaded onto river banks to support infantry units in the field. Unreliable ground surfaces, tides that shifted daily in some places between four and thirteen feet, and steep river banks in some areas made it impossible to offload supporting artillery pieces for every operation. As a result of the Army's unwillingness to give up the firepower of its 105-mm howitzers, the artillerymen experimented with barge-mounted fire support bases in March, 1967. Task Force Six-Gun, the artillery unit attached to the MRF, ordered special barges manufactured at Cam Ranh Bay, but the first models proved too difficult to tow. The second design, with a curved hull, proved much easier for watercraft to tow, and six were built and delivered to Dong Tam for use by the MRF.[245]

The Army provided some of its available LCM-8s to tow the artillery barges into place prior to MRF operations. The Navy had no LCM-8s to spare. The Army artillerymen of Task Force Six-Gun preferred the larger LCM-8 over the usual LCM-6 (most MRF craft were LCM-6 conversions) because the LCM-8 had a greater capacity to store the requisite ammunition and other necessities.[246] Once the LCM-8s reached the point where the artillery needed to be placed for an operation, the barges were anchored to sturdy objects on the shore, usually trees. From their anchorages, the barges could be

[245] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 72-74.

[246] Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 247.

winched closer in to shore or farther out in the river according to the shifting tides. On the decks of the barges, the 105-mm howitzers had a stable surface upon which to provide essential fire support for infantry units in the area. Rather than conducting operations without the assistance of heavy artillery at an FSB, the MRF created fire support pontoon bases (FSPB).

During ordinary MRF operations, a company of infantrymen provided security for the floating artillery barges. Once assigned, the infantrymen would deploy inland from the artillery barges and maintain a constant vigilance in the area throughout the operation (see Figure 4.4, page 108). Fire support pontoon bases often did not remain in an area long enough for the VC to mount an organized attack in force against the barges, especially when guarded by a company of American infantrymen. On some occasions, however, contact with the enemy resulted, usually from snipers. The Viet Cong ordinarily avoided contact with the barges in strength, not wishing, or unable, to engage en masse the units guarding an FSPB. They preferred, instead, to harass elements of the company on barge guard duty, and use their knowledge of the surrounding terrain to escape and evade. If pursued, then the guerrillas would use the same terrestrial knowledge to forecast American movements and set up lethal ambushes.[247]

Riverine combat operations got off to a hurried start. When combat operations began, the Army elements of the MRF had not yet finished in-country training with the Navy. Also, the Navy still operated in boats borrowed from the VNN, as not all USN

[247] Small Unit Action Report, 11 October 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

craft had arrived yet in South Vietnam. The Navy had not fully assembled the MRB before the beginning of combat operations, either. Until the USS *Benewah* arrived later in April, 1967, the MRF infantrymen relied on the USS *Henrico* (APA 45) and the USS *Montrose* (APA 212), a pair of aging attack transports, for a floating support base.[248] In February, 1967, shortly after the Army and Navy began training together in the Rung Sat Special Zone, CG IIFFV ordered the MRF to halt its training exercises and make the transition to combat operations. An increase in Viet Cong water mining incidents in the Long Tau Shipping Channel prompted CG IIFFV to give the order on 16 February 1967.[249] The day before, a civilian freighter hit a water mine while navigating in the Long Tau Shipping Channel. Joint combat operations involving the Army and the Navy in the Rung Sat Special Zone against the Viet Cong ensued the next day.

The first weeks of combat saw the MRF operate in the RSSZ from its makeshift MRB and from its temporary headquarters at Bear Cat, as the base at Dong Tam was not quite ready in February to receive the residents intended for it. The initial missions assigned to the MRF were designed "to keep the Viet Cong off balance and curtail his movement" throughout the Rung Sat.[250] Much like Operation Jackstay conducted by the US Marines in early 1966, the first MRF combat operation, River Raider I, took place in

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[248] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, March 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[249] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, February 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[250] AAR (Rung Sat Special Zone and Nhon Trach District), 31 May 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

the Rung Sat. The MRF expected to find and destroy Viet Cong mine manufacturing installations and weapons repair depots.

According to early intelligence estimates, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), headquarters for all Viet Cong military activity in South Vietnam and believed to be located somewhere in III CTZ near the Cambodian border, restructured its command organization in the Rung Sat Special Zone in early 1966. At that time, COSVN established T-10, a new political and military front in the Rung Sat. T-10's mission included interrupting shipping on the Long Tau, and securing base areas in the Rung Sat Special Zone. Estimates indicated T-10 fielded 1,380 men.[251]

For approximately one month, the MRF roamed the Rung Sat Special Zone in search of elements of T-10. The Tiger Battalion (3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry) worked closely with RAS 9 in the Rung Sat on search and destroy missions throughout the remainder of February and into early March, 1967. Contact with the enemy occurred on occasion, but was usually considered light. During Operation River Raider I, the infantry companies of the MRF rarely engaged VC units much larger than squads or platoons in the RSSZ. An insufficient trail network throughout the swampy region prevented the Viet Cong from massing once contact with the Americans was established. At the same time, the guerrillas deliberately avoided contact because the same inefficient trail network would likely prevent them from escaping. Neither could the Viet Cong escape on sampans, a popular mode of traveling on the waterways among the indigenous people of

[251] AAR (Rung Sat Special Zone and Nhon Trach District), 31 May 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 23.

the Mekong delta and of the Rung Sat, because sampans moved too slowly compared to the MRF craft.[252]

Instead, the insurgents relied on tactics that included evasion and seeding an area with booby traps. Viet Cong elements of the T-10 unit remained aware of their vulnerability to American firepower, especially air attacks, if they massed and defended a fixed position. As a result, the VC avoided massive contact and often hid or exited from an area whenever American forces appeared.[253] On several occasions during River Raider I, the MRF infantrymen located VC base camps, munitions factories, hospitals, weapons caches, and bunker complexes in the swamps completely devoid of enemy personnel. As a result, the troopers had to content themselves with the knowledge that they captured and/or destroyed significant quantities of enemy materiel and his means of waging war. On the other hand, a lack of contact with the enemy, and mounting injuries and deaths from booby traps, combined with feelings of frustration with the inability to avenge those casualties.[254]

Despite minimal contact with the Viet Cong in the Rung Sat, the MRF obtained crucial results, learned valuable lessons, and gained essential experience from its initial combat operations. First of all, and perhaps most importantly, the MRF learned about the

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[252] AAR (Rung Sat Special Zone and Nhon Trach District), 31 May 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 24.

[253] AAR (Rung Sat Special Zone and Nhon Trach District), 31 May 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 25.

[254] Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 210.

new enemy it faced in South Vietnam. Even without a lot of contact, the MRF ascertained some Viet Cong capabilities, tactics, and habits. Secondly, the MRF found several large caches of weapons and ammunition, seized hundreds of pounds of documents, captured and thereby deprived the enemy of tons of rice, and destroyed VC infrastructure such as weapons manufacturing workshops (primarily water mines in the Rung Sat), bases, rest areas, hospital installations, and bunker complexes.[255]

The MRF also learned what the watery delta environment could do to a soldier's feet. Army commanders decided early that a soldier could spend no more than two days in the field before he needed to dry out for a period of at least twenty-four hours. Foot and skin infections ranked high among common initial afflictions in the field among MRF troops. During early operations in the Rung Sat, the Army found that five percent of the troops in the field were rendered ineffective due to skin infections and foot trouble caused by feet being constantly damp.[256] As a result, the MRF operated with only one or two battalions in the field at all times. With at least one battalion in the field, another battalion of the brigade stayed aboard the MRB on guard duty while its troops dried out. The third battalion provided security at Bear Cat. Dong Tam, after it had become operational, also served, among its original purposes, as a drying-out station for MRF troops. As at Bear Cat, one battalion remained responsible for the security of Dong Tam.

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[255] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, March 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[256] AAR (Rung Sat Special Zone and Nhon Trach District), 31 May 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 47.

The completion of the facilities at Dong Tam, combined with the capacity of the MRB, eliminated the need to retain the facilities at Bear Cat for an MRF infantry battalion.

Throughout March and April, 1967, the Spearheader Battalion (4th Battalion, 47th Infantry) continued to operate in the Rung Sat Special Zone southeast of Saigon with Task Group (TG) 117.2 (RAS 11). The Tiger Battalion (3/47) moved into the Mekong delta with elements of TG 117.1 (RAS 9), on 10 April 1967, to conduct initial combat operations in the Mekong delta, and assist in providing security with other Ninth ID units at Dong Tam until the engineers completed construction. Throughout April, ships and craft attached to TF 117 continued to arrive in South Vietnam and be distributed among the task groups. As more US craft arrived in the delta, the Navy began returning to the VNN the boats borrowed earlier for training purposes. The USS *Benewah* arrived to relieve the USS *Montrose* (APA 212) as the flagship of the burgeoning MRB. The USS *Kemper County* (LST 854) arrived for duty as the first supply ship for the MRB. With the exception of the USS *Colleton*, the MRB possessed its full complement of ships by the end of April, 1967.[257]

The MRF units newly arrived in the delta immediately set out on operations in Dinh Tuong Province. Task Group 117.1 worked in the Mekong delta on joint operations consisting of battalion sized combat maneuvers, intelligence gathering, reconnaissance, and water borne security for Dong Tam. The 3/47 battalion conducted search and destroy operations in their new AO in Dinh Tuong Province with the assistance of TG 117.1. In

[257] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, April 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

April, 1967, during initial combat operations in the Mekong delta, as the MRF continued learning how to function in the new environment, enemy contact remained light. The lack of severe enemy contact provided the MRF with the necessary time to conduct essential shakedown operations in the delta, which provided the two components of the MRF some time to get adjusted to working together on joint operations from the MRB and from Dong Tam.

The MRF, upon adding the Mekong delta to its tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), had specific goals in mind. The MRF, during its opening operations in the delta in April and May, 1967, initially focused on eliminating Viet Cong elements from the provinces in III- and IV CTZ north of the My Tho River. By focusing on reducing the VC influence in Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, and Long An Provinces, the MRF would lessen the immediate communist threat to Saigon, as well as assist in protecting the Long Tau Shipping Channel, Saigon's link with the South China Sea.

Upon completion of the first goal, the MRF would then concentrate on neutralizing Viet Cong units operating in the area of IV CTZ south of the My Tho River between it and the Bassac River, that region containing the provinces of Sa Dec, Vinh Long, Vinh Binh, and Kien Hoa. Upon removing the communist threat from that region, the MRF would then focus on the rest of the delta south of the Bassac River, including the U Minh Forest.[258] Though the MRF spent most of its operating time in the area north of the Bassac River, events unfolded in early 1968 that did not allow the MRF to focus on those specific goals. The demands of the Tet Offensive caused the MRF to expand its

[258] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 145.

operations within the TAOR to places never before visited by American soldiers and sailors.

Initial MRF forays in Dinh Tuong Province in March and April, 1967, tested the operational concept of the joint Army-Navy force in its entirety (the essential elements of the MRB were not all available for operations in February in the RSSZ, nor was Dong Tam entirely operational). A new facet to the MRF mission in the delta, to be conducted with combat operations, included providing security for the MRB as well as for Dong Tam while engineers completed construction of the base.[259] During the initial combat operations in Dinh Tuong Province, the MRF worked on perfecting its basic maneuvers. During a typical MRF operation, one maneuver battalion in the Second Brigade deployed at least two, more often three, companies into the field against one or more Viet Cong targets. A fourth company from that battalion provided security for the anchored artillery barges. Another battalion stayed with the MRB drying out, refitting, and/or providing shore security. Elements of the third maneuver battalion usually remained at Dong Tam on base security detail (see Figure 4.4, page 108).

Throughout the summer and fall months of 1967, the MRF proved its capability to maneuver rapidly throughout the delta and bring with it tremendous firepower. During the summer and fall seasons, the MRF conducted numerous operations in the provinces of Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, Long An, Kien Phong, and Gia Dinh (part of the RSSZ lay in this province). Acting on the most recent and reliable intelligence reports from various sources throughout the delta, the MRF launched missions against the Viet Cong with the

[259] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 93.

aim of destroying the communist insurgency. Having three maneuver battalions allowed the MRF to conduct missions simultaneously in many different areas. For example, the 4/47 operated in the Rung Sat from Bear Cat until the middle of May, 1967, before moving to Dong Tam. Once at Dong Tam, the 4/47 provided platoons to patrol the area around Dong Tam, and provide security for Dong Tam's pipelines and dredges. Before May ended, some elements of the 4/47 returned to the Rung Sat to conduct operations there while others of the 4/47 remained at Dong Tam providing security.[260]

Meanwhile, during the summer months, which coincide with the rainy season in the Mekong delta, the 3/47 participated in Operation Coronado I, which consisted of several different missions in Dinh Tuong Province. Preceding one mission, intelligence indicated Main Force (MF) and Local Force (LF) Viet Cong units were located throughout the province and were engaged in activities such as proselytizing against the GVN, mining waterways, moving supplies, and recruiting and training guerrillas.

In June, 1967, the MRF intelligence network discovered the Cho Gao Local Force was operating with fifty men in one area. The Americans then designed a mission to insert the Tiger Battalion (3/47) into the area to conduct a search and destroy operation. Three companies of the battalion worked together throughout the mission, but no contact was made with any hostile forces. Instead, the Tiger Battalion found ubiquitous bunkers, a machine gun position in a hut, numerous punji stick booby trap pits, and a few booby trap warning signs. The soldiers destroyed the hut, the bunkers, and the pits while

[260] AAR for Operations in the Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone, 30 June 1967, RG 472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

detaining five suspects. The Americans suffered one casualty, a man wounded by a booby trap.[261]

Later in July, 1967, the 3/47 returned to Dinh Tuong Province in search of the 514th Provincial Mobile (PM) Battalion, and the 261st and 263rd Main Force Viet Cong Battalions operating in the Cam Son Secret Zone, west of Dong Tam. The Tiger Battalion mounted another search and destroy operation after being inserted into the AO via ATCs. Upon landing, one company came into contact with what was perceived to be a platoon sized VC element wielding small arms. While the other two American companies maneuvered into blocking positions, the guerrillas broke contact and fled. The 3/47 established night defensive positions (NDP) and remained alert for any other VC activity in the area. The next day, the Tigers continued maneuvers in the vicinity via ATCs and even used helicopters to insert troops in areas to form blocking positions into which one company attempted to sweep any remaining enemy elements. No contact was made, but the battalion again found and destroyed numerous bunkers, captured nearly one ton of rice, and detained twenty suspects to be interrogated later at Dong Tam.[262]

In August, 1967, the MRF continued operations in the Mekong delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone. Again, intelligence indicated the Viet Cong were operating in the Rung Sat repairing and manufacturing weapons such as small arms, mortars, and

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[261] Combat Operations AAR (Tiger Coronado I), 17 June 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[262] Combat Operations AAR (Tiger Coronado I), 8 July 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

water mines for use on the Long Tau to disrupt shipping to and from the port of Saigon. The MRF learned the C909 Engineer Workshop Company, organized into four thirty-man platoons, operated in base camps in an area in the RSSZ. The C909 Company not only could mine freighters, but also had the ability to mine TF 117 craft. Intelligence further indicated that approximately one hundred fifty men in the 702nd Local Force Battalion also operated in the area with a plethora of weapons including small arms, 57-mm recoilless rifles, B-40 rockets, 82- and 60-mm mortars, and numerous light machine guns. If challenged, MRF intelligence officers believed the VC units in the area would offer stubborn resistance. Therefore, prior to launching the ground phase of the mission, nine preplanned airstrikes hit known or suspected Viet Cong installations in the area.[263]

Much of the intelligence leading up to this particular mission came from a *Hoi Chanh*. The Allies referred to individual Viet Cong guerrillas who took advantage of the *Chieu Hoi* program as *Hoi Chanh*. The *Chieu Hoi* program, also known as the "open arms" amnesty program, allowed a Viet Cong guerrilla to surrender to Saigon forces. The GVN provided incentives, usually cash, for guerrillas to surrender themselves as well as their arms. Occasionally, a *Hoi Chanh* would provide information to ARVN or American units about guerrilla tactics, where VC arms caches or bases were located, and where certain insurgent units operated and in what strength. Other intelligence for this particular mission came from Side Looking Aerial Radar (SLAR) images that indicated heavy arms trafficking on the water via sampans. The MRF believed the streams in the

[263] Combat Operations AAR (Tiger Coronado III), 22 August 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

area served as lines of communication for the VC cadre after curfew. Prior to this particular operation, Navy SEALs had also discovered bunker complexes and fighting positions in the area, indicating a readiness on the part of the guerrillas to defend their workshop base area.[264] The available intelligence indicated considerable continuing insurgent activity in the area.

No enemy contact resulted during this operation, however. Nor did the MRF infantrymen find their primary target, the C909 Company weapons manufacturing and repair base camp. Either the *Hoi Chanh* had lied about its existence and/or location, or the C909 Company had prior warning and fled the area before the MRF arrived in force. After no enemy contact during this particular mission, MRF leaders altered some of their basic assumptions about possible Viet Cong resistance. The MRF soon came to realize the Viet Cong, being adept at camouflage, evasion, and escaping, if they had indication any American forces were in the area, would flee and hide or blend in with the local population rather than offer resistance.[265]

Operations continued throughout August, 1967, in Long An Province and in the western portion of the Rung Sat Special Zone with very little enemy contact. By the end of the month, intelligence officers concluded the guerrillas in Long An Province were

[264] Combat Operations AAR (Tiger Coronado III), 22 August 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[265] Combat Operations AAR (Tiger Coronado III), 22 August 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

"down to marginal strength and not combat effective."[266] Apparently, the guerrillas had split up into small units in order to avoid contact with the superior MRF.

The Viet Cong undoubtedly suffered at the hands of the MRF during the summer months of 1967, even if they avoided contact with the Americans in many cases. During the summer, the MRF captured tons of enemy materiel such as weapons and ammunition, documents, and food. MRF infantrymen also destroyed hundreds of bunkers and fighting positions, guerrilla base camps, hospitals and rest stations, and captured or killed hundreds of enemy personnel. The Americans figured the Viet Cong would need time to adjust to the new MRF tactics the guerrillas now faced in the delta. For example, most of the bunkers destroyed in Dinh Tuong Province faced inland as though prepared to defend against infantrymen inserted by helicopters. Very few of the bunkers and fighting positions initially discovered and destroyed by MRF infantrymen faced streams and rivers.[267] This indicated the guerrillas were not prepared in early 1967 to meet resistance or threats to their security in the delta originating from the water. Apparently, the insurgents expected to be attacked by troops arriving in helicopters, not boats. That the Viet Cong did not initially expect the Americans to attack from the water proved the novelty of the Mobile Afloat Force concept. The benefits of the novelty could be seen in the initial disruption the MRF caused in areas the VC once believed secure from any American or ARVN threat.

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[266] Combat Operations AAR – OPORD 56-67 (Tiger Coronado IV), 2 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[267] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 145.

After three months of riverine operations in the Mekong delta beginning in April, 1967, the MRF intelligence section had seen very little from the Viet Cong that would indicate the guerrillas would be capable of bringing rockets, recoilless rifles, and water mines to bear against MRF craft while in transit in Dinh Tuong Province. As a result, in June, 1967, MRF intelligence officers indicated the Viet Cong would need approximately six more months to adjust to the recent American presence in the Mekong delta.[268] Furthermore, MRF leaders believed the more their forces moved around in the Mekong delta, the more time the Viet Cong would need to adjust to the new American riverine tactics and equipment.[269] An incident that occurred on 15 September 1967 enlightened the Americans to the fact that the guerrillas had finally adjusted to the presence of the MRF in their midst. In the Cam Son Secret Zone in western Dinh Tuong Province along the Rach Ba Rai River, the Viet Cong demonstrated to the MRF that they were now capable of resisting waterborne infiltration into places once believed secure.

At 0300, 15 September 1967, elements of TG 117.2 loaded infantrymen of the Third Battalion, Sixtieth Infantry (3/60) onto its ATCs from the USS *Colleton*. By 0415, with loading completed, the riverine column departed from the MRB and proceeded to its designated area of operations. At 0645, the column formed into its assault positions and then entered the Rach Ba Rai River from the My Tho River branch of the Mekong at 0700.[270] The convoy included nine ATCs with infantrymen (three companies with three

[268] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 145.

[269] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 145.

[270] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives,

platoons apiece), one CCB, two ATCs serving as minesweepers (not enough ASPBs were available in-country yet for this particular mission), three monitors, and one ATC(H) with a helicopter deck that served as the floating battalion aid station.

Along the Rach Ba Rai, farther upstream but not far from where it flows into the Mekong, is a salient the American soldiers and sailors referred to as "Snoopy's Nose." The salient is an eastward-bulging meander in the southerly-flowing Rach Ba Rai River (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6). At 0730, shortly after the first ATC entered the salient, and three months before the MRF believed they were capable, the Viet Cong attacked the riverine column from both shores with small arms, rockets, and recoilless rifle fire from fortified positions facing the river. Just as the Viet Minh had done against the French *dinassauts* in the First Indochina War, the Viet Cong had matured into a formidable fighting force by adjusting to the new demands of the tactical situation they now faced in the Mekong delta against the Americans.

Within twenty minutes after first contact, ten different boats had been hit by B-40 rockets fired from the riverbanks. In the melee, one ATC attempted to beach and disembark its infantry. The troops came under immediate small arms fire, suffered a few wounded, and were ordered back onto the boat. At 0750, the task group commander ordered the ATC(H) to beach away from the fighting so the wounded and dead could be transferred to her from other boats. By 0840, while the transfer of the wounded to the ATC(H) made good progress, some of the other ATCs that suffered casualties aboard

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College Park, Maryland. This document provides a minute by minute report of the action along the Rach Ba Rai River on 15-16 September 1967.

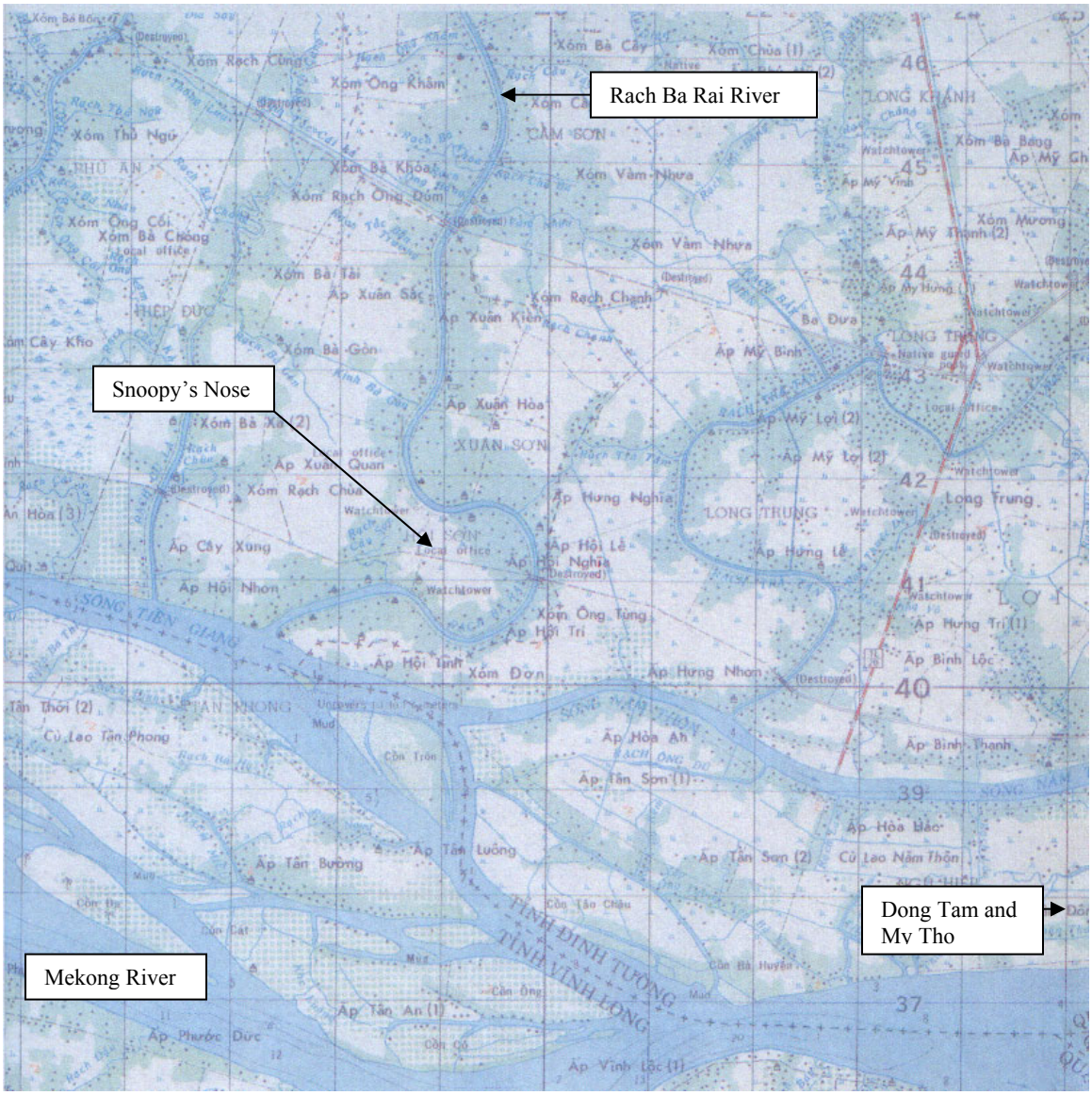

Figure 4.5 Rach Ba Rai River

Source: Khiem Ich (Cai Lay), 6229-4 [map]. 1:50,000. L7014 Series. 29th Engr. Bn. US Army, September, 1973. The Vietnam Archive Map Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

Figure 4.6 Snoopy's Nose

Source: Khiem Ich (Cai Lay), 6229-4 [map]. 1:50,000. L7014 Series. 29th Engr. Bn. US Army, September, 1973. The Vietnam Archive Map Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

began the process of re-crewing. At 0900 replacement minesweepers and monitors arrived, having been summoned shortly after first contact. By 0930 the riverine task group had reconsolidated. Efforts to transfer the wounded and dead continued under constant sniper fire. By 1020, the task group completed the transfer of fifty-two wounded soldiers and sailors to the ATC(H) for treatment and then proceeded to its original beach objectives.[271]

Ten minutes later, the lead boats of the riverine column received automatic weapons and B-40 rocket fire again from both banks. In two minutes, four more boats received damage from rockets, some boats having been hit with up to seven rocket rounds. American casualties continued to mount. At 1048, some ATCs reached their beach objectives and the infantry disembarked under small arms fire. One monitor attacked a bunker at close range along the shore from which rocket fire had been received. The monitor succeeded in reducing the bunker and suppressing the fire from it, but not without sustaining some damage herself. The riverine column continued to receive small arms fire and occasional rockets from both banks throughout the day.[272] In all, eighteen river craft received damage from enemy fire in four hours of fighting along a

[271] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[272] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

two mile stretch of the Snoopy's Nose salient. The ambush marked the heaviest volume of fire the MRF had received from the Viet Cong to date.[273]

On orders from higher authorities, the naval task group stayed on the Rach Ba Rai overnight to support the infantrymen on the ground. At 0330, 16 September, crew members aboard one monitor noticed a VC swimmer alongside their boat. A pair of alert sailors fired two full clips of M-16 rounds into the enemy swimmer until he sank. Throughout the night, Army troops called for illumination rounds from their nearby FSPB, and the Navy task group on station fired twenty 81-mm mortar rounds at the request of the infantry. At noon, the naval task group received more ammunition and continued blocking the river against a possible enemy escape from the infantrymen working nearby in the field.

Later in the afternoon, the soldiers reloaded onto the ATCs and departed the area for the MRB. At 1632, the column received the last amount of small arms fire from the guerrillas on the shore. Upon returning fire, witnesses among the riverine column observed a large secondary explosion. The soldiers and sailors believed it to be an arms cache left by the insurgents after their exfiltration from the area during the previous night. By 1900, the column closed with the MRB, thus concluding the operation along the Rach Ba Rai River.[274]

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[273] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[274] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Most of the action on 15-16 September 1967, involved the Navy as the Army could not get ashore until late in the morning. Upon disembarkation, soldiers became pinned down by small arms fire immediately, which reduced their effectiveness. Consequently, the Navy learned several valuable lessons. For instance, Army personnel could be relied upon to assist during demanding and tense situations afloat. Sailors witnessed soldiers firing their own weapons over the gunwales of the ATCs, as well as throwing hand grenades from the well decks. That soldiers could throw hand grenades at targets ashore from ATCs indicates the proximity of the combatants to one another during the battle. In some instances, Army soldiers manned some boats' fifty-caliber and 30-mm machine guns when sailors were wounded or killed. Sailors also witnessed soldiers passing ammunition and fighting fires during the combat.[275]

More specifically, the Navy realized ATCs, working as minesweepers with chain drag countermeasures, operated too slowly. ASPBs took up the responsibility of mine-sweeping for tactical riverine columns when enough of the craft had arrived in South Vietnam later in the year.[276] Another problem with the ATCs that became apparent after the 15-16 September 1967 operation involved the Boston Whaler each ATC carried. Infantrymen used Boston Whalers to penetrate into areas where ATCs could not reach. The outboard gasoline motors on the Boston Whalers tended to catch fire when rocket

[275] Combat Operations AAR, 22 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 15, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[276] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

shrapnel pierced the exposed fuel tanks. During the battle on the Rach Ba Rai, three Boston Whalers' motors caught fire and engulfed three ATCs' sterns in flames. As a result, the Navy suggested discontinuing carrying Boston Whalers on riverine craft until outriggers could be fabricated that would allow the "Boston Whalers to be towed off the quarter and be easily maneuvered alongside with minimum personnel exposure for troop landing."[277]

The Navy believed, in the case as it pertained to the action on the Rach Ba Rai on 15-16 September, that the night illumination artillery rounds requested by Army personnel compromised the position of the boats that stayed on station during the night. The glare off the surface of the water from the illumination rounds silhouetted the assault craft and reduced the protection darkness afforded the boats. The Navy suggested that closer coordination between the RAS commander and the Army ground commander regarding the use of night illumination rounds needed to be evaluated. After all, at least one VC swimmer found his way to the side of one Monitor during the night.[278]

Mobile Riverine Force leaders also observed and acknowledged the benefits of having a floating aid station accompanying the assault craft. With at least one ATC(H) capable of accommodating a helicopter attached to any tactical riverine column, when casualties began to mount, neither time nor energy need be spent finding a suitable

[277] Combat Operations AAR, 25 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 14, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[278] Combat Operations AAR, 25 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 14, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

helicopter landing zone to evacuate any wounded sailors or soldiers. By September, 1967, in addition to an ATC(H), several other ATCs had helicopter landing pads welded on above their well decks. As a result of this particular innovation, riverine craft important to an assault did not have to be detached from the column to transport wounded to the MRB or to a closer aid station such as Dong Tam.[279]

Despite the realization the Viet Cong had matured as fighters to the point where they were capable of bringing rockets and recoilless rifles to bear in an attack on a riverine column while it was in transit, MRF missions continued in the Mekong delta. In the following months, the MRF also noticed the Viet Cong in Dinh Tuong and Long An Provinces seemed to have adjusted to American riverine tactics. Less contact with even smaller VC units occurred in areas of operation in Dinh Tuong and Long An Provinces. The MRF leaders observed the smaller guerrilla units using rockets and recoilless rifles to delay the progress of the river craft and inflict casualties.[280]

The VC realized they could interrupt an MRF mission, and destroy its timetable, simply by sniping at the riverine column with rockets while it was in transit. The insurgents needed to deploy only a few men to ambush an entire MRF tactical riverine column. With the ambush sprung, the column would be compelled to defend itself and then investigate the contact. In the meantime, Viet Cong forces further upstream or

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[279] Combat Operations AAR, 25 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, MACV, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3), Evaluation and Analysis Division, Box 14, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Also see U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[280] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 146.

elsewhere in the area had time to disappear. Thus, the MRF experienced a minimal amount of significant contact during the closing months of 1967.

On some occasions, however, the Viet Cong did engage the American ground forces. The Viet Cong did not need a superior number of men to engage the American soldiers, only well fortified or easily defended positions, or positions from which exfiltration would not be too difficult or costly. The Americans learned after several months of patrolling on foot in the Mekong delta that an enemy attack would likely occur while American infantrymen were in an open flat area, like a rice paddy or at a stream crossing. An attack would usually originate from areas where dense vegetation provided excellent cover and concealment, as on the edges of rice paddies.[281]

In early October, 1967, the Viet Cong ambushed units from the 4/47 with deadly results while a platoon was in an open rice paddy. The American platoon retreated behind a protective dike in the paddy, where they remained pinned down by an estimated company of Viet Cong guerrillas wielding heavy machine guns and small arms. The Viet Cong hit the Americans from a well defended position that could not be assaulted from the front across the rice paddy without the attackers sustaining serious losses. The density of the vegetation in the tree line at the edge of the rice paddy from where the guerrilla attack commenced provided enough concealment to cover the insurgents' escape.[282]

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[281] Small Unit Action Report, 2 October 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[282] Small Unit Action Report, 10 October 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 4/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 3, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Even with the disruption of Viet Cong activity the novelty of the Mobile Riverine Force initially caused, with its ability to penetrate enemy sanctuaries coupled with tremendous firepower, the guerrillas adjusted and remained active throughout the Mekong delta. The Viet Cong continued to harass ARVN outposts and watchtowers scattered throughout the delta, and to interdict commerce on Highway Four. Furthermore, the Viet Cong continued to maul CIDG units as well as RF/PF units throughout the remaining months of 1967. The MRF continued to operate in the delta and in the Rung Sat wherever intelligence indicated the presence of VC units. Despite the effort, contact with the enemy remained light. Villagers, when questioned by MRF soldiers about the location of enemy cadre in an area, indicated the guerrillas split into very small units and scattered in all directions upon learning of the imminent arrival of the MRF in an area.[283]

In the hope of being more effective against the communist insurgents, the Americans enlisted the assistance of their allies in the Mekong delta. The GVN maintained three ARVN divisions in the delta, numerous RF/PF and CIDG units, South Vietnamese National Police (VNNP) detachments, six VNN River Assault Groups, and some South Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) battalions. The MRF often worked closely with the VNMC on several occasions. Other times, the MRF operated with the ARVN. On still other occasions the MRF worked with RF/PF or CIDG units, as well as

[283] Combat AAR, 10 December 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

the VNNP. In late October, 1967, in an operation in the Rung Sat, the MRF worked for the first time with elements of the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment.[284]

The ARVN Seventh Infantry Division often assisted the MRF in the early operations after the Americans arrived in the delta. The Seventh ARVN ID was headquartered at My Tho, a location in the delta from which coordination with the MRF could be accomplished with relative ease. The Seventh ARVN contributed to Operation Coronado IV in September, 1967, which provided security for an election that witnessed a ninety-two percent voter turn-out rate. Vietnamese officials credited the high rate of voter turn-out to the arrival and continued presence of the MRF in the delta.[285] Later in October, the MRB moved from its latest anchorage off Vung Tau to the junction of the Vam Co River and the Soi Rap River. The MRF and its ARVN allies then provided security for an election conducted in Long An Province for the South Vietnamese Lower House. Eighty-three percent of the registered voters participated in the election. Again, South Vietnamese officials credited the presence of the MRF in the area for the high rate of voter participation.[286]

The ARVN did not remain on election security duty only. On several occasions, ARVN units directly assisted the Americans in the field against the Viet Cong. On 20

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[284] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, October 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[285] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 48.

[286] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, October 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

September 1967, the MRF, with the assistance of the Seventh ARVN, assaulted units of the Viet Cong 516th and 540th MF Battalions in Kien Hoa Province.[287] Later in October, the Seventh ARVN also contributed to an assault on the Viet Cong 263rd and 514th MF Battalions in Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa Provinces.[288] The flexibility demonstrated by the MRF with the seamless inclusion of allied RVNAF units on operations proved the overall value of the MRF's contribution to the allied effort in the Mekong delta.

After the Americans had been in the delta for a period of time, many delta villagers, upon witnessing American soldiers overtly assisting them, slowly came to trust the Americans. The villagers, when they realized the Americans were not there to rape and murder them as the Viet Cong would have them believe, often provided US units with invaluable intelligence about insurgent activities in an area. The Americans, in turn, soon realized the value of building solid relationships with local delta villagers.

Soon after combat operations got underway in the delta, the Army civilian affairs officer (S-5) attached to the Ninth ID established medical civic action programs (MEDCAP) and dental civic action programs (DENCAP) designed to assist delta civilians. These programs brought military doctors and dentists to rural areas to treat peasants with health problems, dispense medical and dental supplies, and train villagers

[287] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[288] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

in minor medical procedures and hygiene.[289] Invariably, these pacification forays into the rural villages led to the gathering of intelligence either by observation or directly from the villagers themselves.

In the middle of January, 1968, a priest alerted the Allies to the presence of at least twenty Viet Cong guerrillas using his village, An Quoi, as a staging area for terrorist activities and roadside sabotage. The priest also indicated his village served as a resting station for members of the Viet Cong 514th Main Force Battalion, and that the area was heavily booby trapped.[290] Acting upon this intelligence, the MRF opted to assist the VNNP with a particular operation in the area.

Upon learning about enemy activity in An Quoi, the 3/47 participated in a mission that established a cordon around the village so the VNNP could conduct a search. At 0230 on 16 January 1968, four companies of the 3/47 left Dong Tam in trucks to establish the cordon, which was in place by 0400. With the area secured, the VNNP moved in to search the village. By 1045, the search was complete, and by 1145, the 3/47 was back at Dong Tam. While the VNNP conducted their search, the Second Brigade's S-5 and elements of the 3/47 performed a MEDCAP for the villagers, during which time

[289] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 73.

[290] Combat AAR, 2 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Also see U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, January 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

eighty-two people were treated and several commodities distributed (school supplies, soap, dental hygiene kits, and refreshments).[291]

Not every Allied operation ran smoothly or satisfactorily. The Americans eventually realized their Vietnamese allies, however valuable a partner in the war against the Viet Cong, did not always prosecute every mission with the same urgency as the Americans. The search at An Quoi netted eighty-nine suspects, six of whom, upon further interrogation at Dong Tam, proved to be VC. The cordon resulted in thirteen US troops wounded by booby traps. The portion of the mission that did not run as smoothly as the Americans would have liked was the search conducted by the VNNP. The Americans believed the search was inadequate as "the police spent most of their four hours sauntering along the main streets of the village."[292] One sweep by the police on the east side of the village took only twenty-five minutes, indicating a lack of thoroughness. The Americans felt future sweeps and searches should include American personnel supplementing the Vietnamese forces.[293] With assistance from regular delta villagers and allied units, despite the occasional inadequate performance of Vietnamese allies, the Americans could vary the nature of some of their operations and continue to experience success in the field.

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[291] Combat AAR, 2 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[292] Combat AAR, 2 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[293] Combat AAR, 2 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

In the weeks prior to the communist Tet Offensive, the Americans observed the Viet Cong continued to engage the MRF in battle, but only on rare occasions. The Viet Cong strategy, harassing ARVN and other Allied outposts, interdicting commerce along Highway Four, and stalling riverine columns with ambushes caused the Americans to settle into the role of a reaction force. The VC tactics drew the American forces into positions from which they could be easily ambushed, slowed, and distracted. Despite favorable positions from which to attack units of the MRF, contact with the enemy remained light.[294]

Light or nonexistent enemy contact, however, favored an increase in MEDCAP operations in Dinh Tuong Province during the period. On 22 and 23 January 1968, units of the Ninth ID conducted two different MEDCAP operations that treated over two hundred civilians. The Americans also left several dental hygiene packs for villagers and *Chieu Hoi* leaflets for any interested enemy combatants.[295]

In an attempt to regain some of the initiative from the Viet Cong, the Navy developed a new riverine tactic. After all the ASPBs arrived in South Vietnam, the Navy could then begin experimenting with a new offensive concept. The Navy formed Riverine Armed Reconnaissance Elements (RARE) to accompany and protect troop-laden ATCs and other boats in a riverine column as they transited the waterways of the

[294] Combat AAR, 12 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Also see Combat AAR, 29 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[295] Combat AAR, 29 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Mekong delta. A RARE consisted of two monitors, two ASPBs, and two ATCs. Often, in free-fire zones, the boats of the RARE would conduct reconnaissance by fire along riverbanks known or suspected to be VC ambush sites. The RARE employed the reconnaissance by fire tactic to generate and then exploit contact with the enemy.[296] Rather than wait for the guerrillas to initiate contact, a RARE sought to crush any enemy resistance before it could start.

The Army and Navy did not desire to see the MRF fall into the role of a reaction force, but the nature of the enemy's tactics and the war in the Mekong delta often dictated how the Americans used their forces. The Viet Cong rarely exposed themselves to the MRF in groups larger than thirty, and more often engaged the Americans in squad sized elements of three to ten men. Three to ten Viet Cong guerrillas could often delay an entire US company. The Viet Cong, usually faced with superior American firepower, rarely chose to stand and give battle to the MRF, even when contact did occur. The VC quickly learned to maximize the delta environment to their advantage. After adjusting to the MRF, the guerrillas learned only to attack infantrymen from a position that could be easily defended from ground assault. The insurgents also became experts at evasion, escaping, and disappearing among other delta peasants. During MRF operations in the delta and in the RSSZ in 1967, contact with the VC remained light. Since the enemy did not openly engage the MRF in force, the MRF was compelled to penetrate deeper into the recesses of the delta to find and engage the guerrillas. Thus, the MRF, as it roamed the

[296] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary, September 1967, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 53.

delta, of necessity exposed itself to the possibility of being severely damaged due to enemy ambushes, which occurred on numerous occasions.

All that changed on 31 January 1968. In the early morning hours reports streamed in indicating that several delta cities and towns were under communist attack. The Viet Cong and their PAVN allies launched a nationwide assault throughout all of South Vietnam, attacking every major city and every provincial capital. In the Mekong delta, the Viet Cong struck the cities of My Tho, Ben Tre, Cai Lay, Cai Be, and Vinh Long simultaneously. Not far away, in III CTZ, the guerrillas struck Long Binh, Bien Hoa, and parts of Saigon, including the Chinese district of Cholon and the US Embassy. American intelligence "suspected that the VC were planning to conduct strong harassing attacks against US and ARVN Forces and local villages and cities."[297]

The Viet Cong usually chose not to engage the MRF, preferring instead to avoid contact unless they could manipulate conditions to favor their forces. During the Tet Offensive, however, the insurgents appeared en masse on several occasions and attacked urban areas in force, even though US intelligence indicated most "VC units are now very low on personnel, weapons and ammunition. Harassing attacks can be expected to continue as part of the Winter-Spring Campaign."[298] The Viet Cong attacked with large numbers of guerrillas throughout the delta during the initial days of the Tet Offensive.

[297] Combat AAR, 24 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[298] Combat AAR, 24 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

The strength and suddenness of the communist assault in the delta tested the MRF tactics and capabilities to the limits.

The Americans suspected the guerrillas would violate the annual Tet ceasefire truce by continued harassment and agitation, but persisted in believing the enemy ranks were significantly depleted of guerrilla fighters and short-handed on support personnel. American intelligence also perpetuated the belief that the Viet Cong were incapable of launching massive attacks, as it seemed the enemy's preferred method of operation included evasion of superior forces and avoiding contact except to snipe and hinder progress. Therefore, the Americans in the delta were surprised when they realized the scope of the communist assault on urban areas during the Tet truce. The time for the communists to lead the long-awaited General Uprising of the population against the Saigon government had finally arrived.

Prior to the Tet holidays, the MRF deployed its forces in the Mekong delta in order to establish and protect rural Allied installations and conduct limited patrols, as the Allies expected the enemy to violate the ceasefire agreement and continue to move supplies in the delta and harass the ARVN outposts. When reports arrived of VC assaults on urban areas in the delta, the MRF was deployed throughout the countryside in rural areas. When the calls came in to move to the cities to defend against the insurgents, the MRF, though not quite prepared to defend several cities at once, responded quickly to the emergency.

By the evening of 31 January 1968, elements of the Viet Cong 261st, 263rd, and 514th Main Force Battalions had successfully assaulted into My Tho and threatened to

occupy the entire town.[299] As many as half of the men in the local ARVN units had gone home on furlough for the Tet holiday, or were absent without leave (AWOL). By the afternoon of 1 February, the Tiger Battalion (3/47) had returned from the field to Dong Tam where they loaded onto ATCs bound for the defense of My Tho. Upon arriving at the waterfront at My Tho, three companies of the 3/47 moved north into the city and were met shortly thereafter by intense VC small arms fire. A pitched battle ensued in which the Americans suffered three killed and forty-four wounded.[300] The fighting in My Tho lasted for twenty-one hours before the insurgents finally evacuated on 2 February. Upon clearing the streets in My Tho, the Allies discovered one hundred fifteen dead Viet Cong guerrillas.[301]

Intelligence indicated the VC units that withdrew from My Tho were fleeing to the west, toward Cai Lay. The 3/47 CO recalled his three companies in My Tho to the waterfront to load into the waiting ATCs. The units then proceeded upriver as far as they could with the remaining daylight toward Cai Lay. Their route took them up the Rach Ba Rai River, where they ran out of daylight and spent the night in a defensive position before proceeding toward Cai Lay on the morning of 3 February. In two days of maneuvers, the units of the Tiger battalion made no contact with the enemy in the Cai Lay area. On 4 February 1968, the 3/47 loaded onto their ATCs and departed the area for

[299] Combat AAR, 24 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[300] Combat AAR, 24 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[301] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 63-64.

Vinh Long to assist other MRF units engaged in combat with the 305th, 306th, 857th LF Viet Cong Battalions and other local guerrilla units.

Intelligence placed the Viet Cong east of Vinh Long. One company of the 3/47 remained in Vinh Long to provide airfield security while the other three companies swept east toward naval units deployed in blocking positions along the Long Ho River. When the companies arrived at the river with some detainees, the Americans loaded onto the ATCs and departed for the MRB, where they closed at 1900 hours. The next day, 5 February, found elements of the Tiger Battalion resting and maintaining weapons and equipment for the first time after being in action and maneuvering in the field for the past eight days.[302] Other MRF units continued to fight the Viet Cong in the Vinh Long area and secure the airfield over the next few days until 8 February. Those MRF elements returned to My Tho to sweep for the enemy west of the city on 9 February, and then returned to Dong Tam to patrol the area on 10 February 1968.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the delta, the Viet Cong pressed their attack. The insurgents threatened the security of Can Tho and its airfield, a town the MRF had heretofore never visited (see Figure 4.7). Intelligence estimated the guerrillas had a force of 2,500 men in the area around Can Tho.[303] The MRF traveled over one hundred miles to get to Can Tho from Dong Tam, easily the longest single transit distance it had

[302] Combat AAR, 24 February 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[303] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 72.

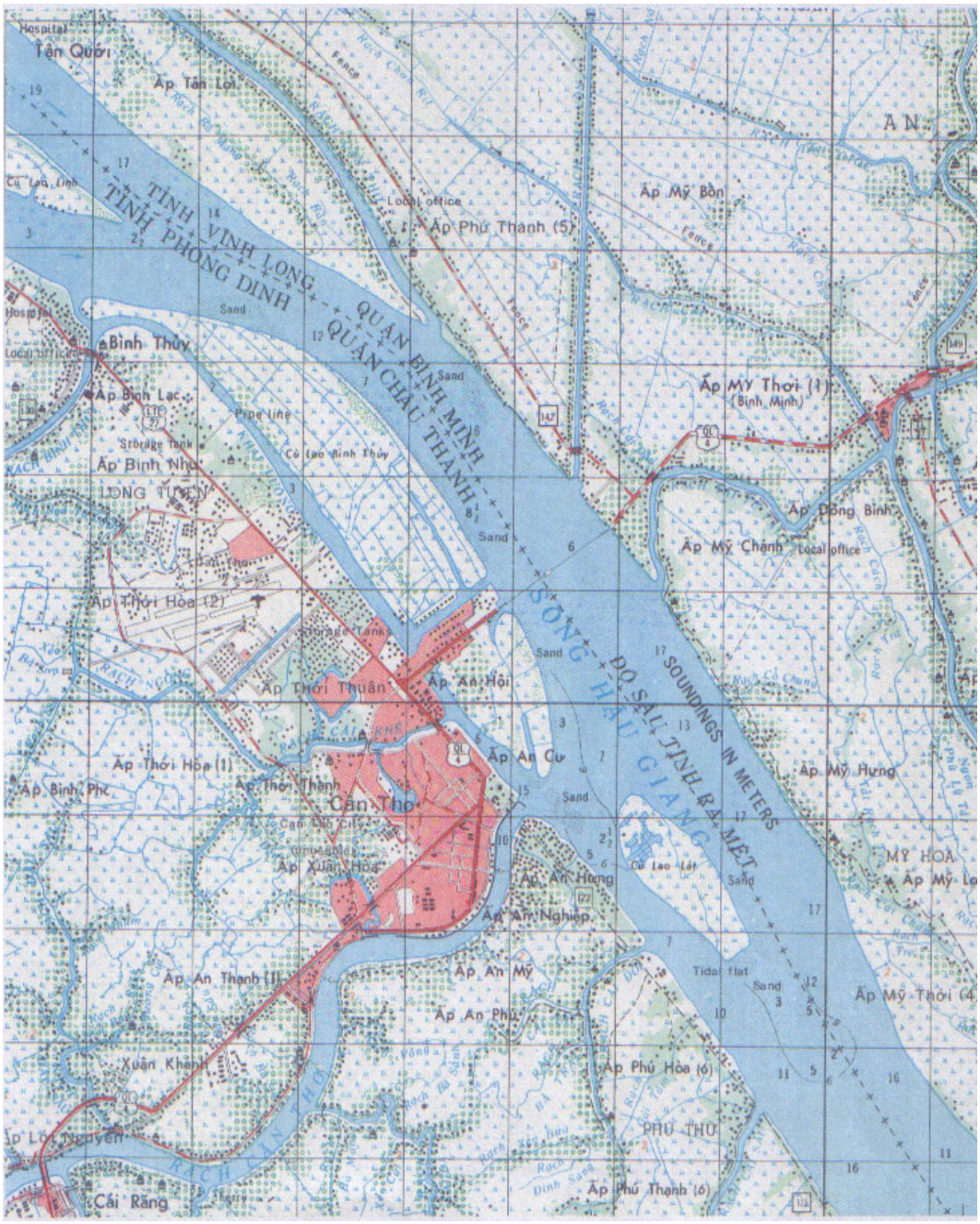

Figure 4.7 Can Tho and the Airfield

Source: Can Tho, 6129-2 [map]. 1:50,000. L7014 Series. December, 1966. The Vietnam Archive Map Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

traversed in the delta to date.[304] Patrolling in the area on 14 February 1968, the infantry discovered the largest enemy weapons cache to date, which included over four hundred sixty B-40 rockets, over one hundred sixty mortar and recoilless rifle rounds, over one hundred mines, two hundred pounds of explosives, two hundred fifty fragmentation grenades, and several cans of small arms rounds. The infantry summoned an EOD team from TF 117 to destroy the materiel.[305] Throughout the operations in the area, the MRF made contact with sizable VC forces. In four days of fighting in the Can Tho area, the MRF claimed fifty-two enemy lives at a cost of eight Americans.[306]

The MRF continued to maneuver and operate throughout the Mekong delta for the remainder of February. The MRF and the ARVN Twenty-first Infantry Division planned a strike against Viet Cong Military Region III headquarters located deep in Phong Dinh Province. Before the operation got underway, MRF intelligence officers received a call about a sizable enemy force in an open area discovered by a spotter helicopter. Instead of striking the enemy headquarters, an MRF unit deployed into the area where the guerrillas had been spotted. As a result, the MRF claimed sixty-six enemy lives.[307] This incident,

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[304] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[305] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 74. Also see Combat AAR, 24 March 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[306] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 74.

[307] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 79.

in which plans were altered at the last minute and an MRF unit diverted, demonstrated further the versatility of the Mobile Riverine Force.

The terrible losses suffered by the Viet Cong in the Mekong delta at the hands of the MRF and the Allies, coupled with the inability of the guerrillas to stimulate the General Uprising of the people of the delta against the Saigon government during Tet, boded ill for the local communist insurgents. After the crisis in the delta's cities and towns waned, the Allies once again took up the pursuit of the enemy in rural areas of the delta. Also, after the emergency during Tet subsided, the MRF could afford to concentrate their efforts once again on pacification in some areas.

Combat operations continued in Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa Provinces throughout the months of March, April, and May, 1968. In Kien Hoa Province, in April, the MRF came under intense attack on the Ba Lai River northeast of the delta town of Ben Tre (see Figure 4.8). Even though the communists suffered a series of setbacks during the Tet Offensive, events on the Ba Lai River proved they were not yet out of the fight. On 4 April 1968, Viet Cong guerrillas ambushed an MRF convoy from a riverbank and caused considerable damage to both men and materiel.

Intelligence indicated two hundred Viet Cong guerrillas of the 516th Provincial Mobile Battalion and other local units were stationed in a base camp in Kien Hoa Province. Other intelligence revealed the possibility of another two hundred insurgents believed to be operating in the province. Local Vietnamese people did not disclose the

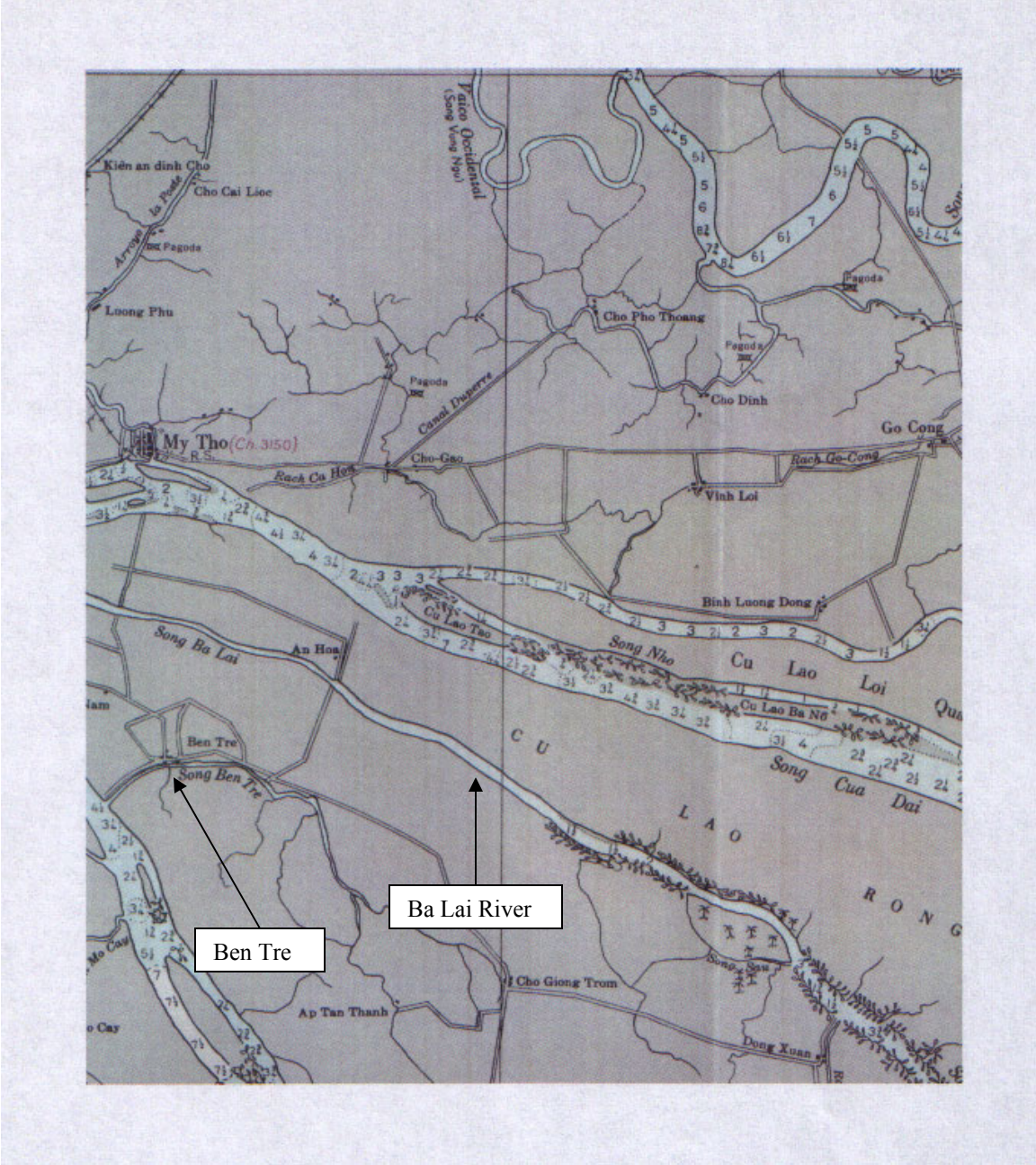

Figure 4.8 Ben Tre and Ba Lai River

Source: Iles de Poulo Condore to Riviere de Saigon, No. 6204 [map]. 1:254,465. 1946, First Edition, Hydrographic Office, Secretary of the Navy, USNS General Edwin D. Patrick Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

exact location of the enemy base camp, and the MRF expected there to be well-constructed bunker complexes along some streams in the area.[308]

The parameters of this particular mission reflected those of previous MRF missions, though no two were exactly alike. Three companies of the 3/47, with the assistance of one RAD, would insert into the area where the S-2 believed the guerrillas would be, to conduct a reconnaissance in force, also known as a search and destroy mission, in the AO. Prior to arrival at the selected beaching site, the riverine column came under intense small arms, heavy machine gun, and rocket fire from one side of the Ba Lai River. When the guerrillas sprang the ambush, one ATC attempted to land its platoon, whose men became immediately pinned down by automatic weapons fire. The guerrillas fought from strengthened positions among coconut palms that came up to the water's edge. When the infantry platoon disembarked and got pinned down, the riverine craft had difficulty providing supporting fire due to the proximity of the friendly forces trapped in the mud on the beach.[309]

The soldiers trapped in the soft mud on the beach faced a bunker containing one fifty-caliber machine gun. The Americans could not return much fire because the soft mud clogged many of their weapons. The mud-jammed rifles and the chest-deep mud rendered the platoon inoperable and extremely vulnerable to the enemy. Meanwhile,

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[308] Combat AAR, 29 April 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[309] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary April 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 53.

other platoons tried to land to assist the pinned platoon, but could not. The fire from the river bank was too intense and landing troops would likely get many men killed. When some ATCs attempted to rescue the trapped platoon from the soft mud, the guerrillas drove the boats away with rockets.[310]

Further upstream, away from the site of the ambush, ATCs offloaded two companies who linked up and headed for the bunkers to relieve pressure on the pinned platoon. Before advancing far, the lead elements of the two companies encountered insurgents in bunkers with more fifty-caliber machine guns. Artillery could not be called to relieve pressure during the battle as the quarters were considered too close. Eventually, the Viet Cong departed and the two relief companies finally relieved the platoon in jeopardy. The infantrymen then settled in for the night; they would conduct patrols in the morning to find the enemy. No contact occurred during the night and no contact was made the next day during the patrols.

On 6 April 1968, the 3/47 reloaded onto ATCs and steamed for the MRB. During the engagement the Navy suffered two men missing in action (presumed drowned) and eight men killed, while the Army suffered sixteen killed and sixty-nine wounded. The Viet Cong suffered far less with only five confirmed killed and sixteen unconfirmed killed.[311] The fighting along the Ba Lai River northeast of Ben Tre in Kien Hoa Province

[310] Combat AAR, 29 April 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[311] For Navy casualties see U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary April 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, 56. For Army and VC casualties see Combat AAR, 29 April 1968, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

proved the Viet Cong were not completely defeated and continued to pose a serious threat not only to the MRF combat forces, but also to the security of the delta.

An incident occurred during the night of 31 October and 1 November 1968 that indicated the Viet Cong still possessed the capabilities to inflict serious damage on American forces. While the USS *Westchester County* (LST 1167) lay anchored with other elements of the MRB in the My Tho River, Viet Cong swimmers attacked her with two water mines. Two explosions ripped open her starboard side, causing compartmental flooding and damaging a few craft tied up alongside her. Not in jeopardy of immediately sinking, she proceeded to Dong Tam for emergency repairs. In the explosions, twenty-one American and Vietnamese soldiers and sailors were killed, twenty-two more were wounded, and four went missing.[312] After the initial repairs, the *Westchester County* sailed for Japan for further repairs. Two weeks later, more enemy swimmers attacked and sank a salvage craft, killing two sailors and injuring thirteen.[313] Dong Tam also continued to receive mortar fire on occasion throughout 1968.

The Viet Cong had to adjust to the presence of the MRF once it arrived in the delta and began challenging the guerrillas in areas they believed secure. One adjustment the VC made was to avoid prolonged contact whenever possible. On numerous occasions the MRF conducted operations that yielded little or no contact with the enemy. The Viet Cong remained a viable fighting force throughout the time the MRF operated in the delta

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[312] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary October 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[313] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 172.

because they avoided contact with the Americans on a large scale. Instead, the insurgents adopted tactics that forced the Americans into a reactionary position. As a reactionary force, the Americans then became more susceptible to VC harassment, sniping, and ambushes that impeded the MRF's progress.

The Viet Cong were not the only combatants that made adjustments during the fighting in the delta. The Americans underwent profound changes in strategy that had a direct impact on the nature of not only the war in the Mekong delta, but also the war being fought throughout all of South Vietnam. After the Tet Offensive of early 1968, some changes in command at the top slots in the American military establishment occurred. With new military commanders in South Vietnam, and with a noticeable political shift in Washington away from supporting the American war effort, the groundwork for a US exodus from South Vietnam began to be established. With a change in command at MACV and COMNAVFORV also came a rearrangement in the MRF that led to a more diverse set of missions and priorities. Those changes within the MRF also facilitated the unit's eventual disbandment and departure from South Vietnam later in 1969.

CHAPTER V

TRANSITIONS, ALTERATIONS, REDEPLOYMENTS

On 2 November 1968, a meeting occurred at MACV headquarters in which representatives from each of the service branches outlined their timetables for turning over US assets to the RVNAF. The officers also intended to discuss the impending withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. General Creighton Abrams headed the briefing. He had officially replaced General Westmoreland as the commander at MACV earlier in July, and had orders from President Lyndon Johnson to extricate US military forces from South Vietnam within as feasible a timeframe as possible.

Two Air Force colonels opened the meeting by presenting a plan that would have all US aircraft and air support facilities in South Vietnamese hands by 1976. General Abrams, before leaving the room, angrily dismissed the Air Force proposal as a plan that would consume too much time. The general insisted the people and the politicians in the United States would not allow the military to spend that kind of time getting out of the war. Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., who had arrived in South Vietnam about one month prior to the meeting to assume the duties as COMNAVFORV, during the pause in the meeting, quickly rearranged with Lieutenant Howard Kerr the Navy's timetable for equipment turnover to the Vietnamese and for American personnel departure.[314]

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[314] Leslie J. Cullen. Brown Water Admiral: Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. and the United States Naval Forces, Vietnam, 1968 – 1970. Unpublished dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1998. A description of the meeting occurs in the first ten pages of Cullen's dissertation. Also see Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 164, for further description of the meeting.

Political winds in Washington had shifted after the Tet Offensive. President Johnson, and then his successor, Richard Nixon, both sought to wind down American involvement in Vietnam by turning the war effort over to the South Vietnamese, a process that came to be known as Vietnamization. Pressure from public sectors across the United States mounted as the war dragged on year after year with no visible end in sight. As pressure to exit Southeast Asia built, support in the United States for the war in Vietnam waned. Many Americans, both public officials and private citizens, had grown weary of the fight to save South Vietnam from international communism. The new mission at MACV, as determined by the White House, reflected these feelings and focused on relieving the United States Armed Forces of its burden in South Vietnam.

Vice Admiral Zumwalt had relieved Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth as Commander of Naval Forces in Vietnam, in late September, 1968. Zumwalt brought to his new command in South Vietnam a dynamic and energetic leadership style that almost immediately changed the course of the US Navy commitment in the Mekong delta. Zumwalt, upon understanding the Johnson and Nixon administrations' need to resolve American military involvement in Vietnam, implemented two key naval missions that directly affected the Mobile Riverine Force: the Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy (SEALORDS) and the Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV). These two programs redirected naval assets to areas in the Mekong delta where the Mobile Riverine Force did not usually operate, and also worked to provide training and naval equipment (particularly riverine craft) to Vietnamese sailors.

Vice Admiral Zumwalt designed ACTOV to prepare the South Vietnamese Navy to assume responsibility for conducting all facets of the naval war to as great a degree as possible as soon as possible. Zumwalt used his position as COMNAVFORV to assist the South Vietnamese Navy in becoming more self-sufficient. Within ACTOV guidelines, the Vietnamese sailors received crash courses in the English language, and on-the-job training from American sailors aboard US riverine vessels destined to be given to the VNN in the future. As Vietnamese sailors became more proficient linguistically and familiar with the various tasks aboard riverine craft, a Vietnamese sailor would take the place of an American sailor until an entire boat crew were Vietnamese and no American sailors remained on board.

Vice Admiral Zumwalt announced the commencement of ACTOV shortly after arriving for duty in South Vietnam. Zumwalt decreed that all US Navy operational responsibility would be assumed by the VNN by 30 June 1970. Zumwalt also insisted the naval assets necessary to conduct riverine operations (boats) would be turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy by that date as well. According to the plan, all support and training facilities, and naval shore bases would be transferred to the VNN two years later, in 1972.[315] After hearing General Abrams castigate the Air Force colonels for the lengthiness of their proposed exit timetable, and realizing the overall urgency behind the mission at MACV to disentangle US forces from Vietnam, Zumwalt gave considerable time and energy to ACTOV during his two year stint as COMNAVFORV. A few years

[315] Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 165.

later, after reflecting on the ACTOV program, Admiral Zumwalt admitted it became one of those "pieces of work" that remained "closest to [his] heart."[316]

The ACTOV program did not diminish the number of Allied riverine craft available in the Mekong delta, only those available to the Americans. Shortly after ACTOV got underway, the Americans began to feel the pinch. On 12 January 1969, River Assault Division 91 stood down as its twenty-five boats were prepared to be given to the VNN. Three weeks later, on 1 February, RAD 91 officially disbanded as its twenty-five river craft were accepted by the VNN during ceremonies aboard the USS *Benewah*. Vice Admiral Zumwalt and Commodore Tran Van Chon, head of the South Vietnamese Navy, presided over the ceremony.[317]

Vice Admiral Zumwalt's energies did not begin and end with the ACTOV program. In October, 1968, he announced the beginning of Operation SEALORDS. Zumwalt designed SEALORDS to "interdict enemy infiltration, open and secure important delta waterways, and pacify as rapidly as possible large segments of the delta region."[318] For SEALORDS operations, Zumwalt envisioned a number of barriers along rivers and canals that would prohibit the communists from infiltrating supplies into the Mekong delta from their Cambodian sanctuaries. The overarching difference between

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[316] Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., *On Watch: A Memoir*. (Arlington, Virginia: Admiral Zumwalt and Associates, Inc., 1976), 40.

[317] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary February 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[318] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary October 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

SEALORDS and Operation Game Warden was the offensive posture projected by the barriers into places in the delta rarely visited by American or Allied forces.

To conduct SEALORDS operations, Zumwalt authorized the creation of a new unit, Task Force 194. Operation Search Turn, one of the first barriers put in place in November, 1968, occurred along the Vinh Te Canal, just inside the Cambodian border, in the southwestern Mekong delta, near Ha Tien. Other SEALORDS operations would soon follow with Operation *Tran Hung Dao* also getting underway in November, 1968. Operation Giant Slingshot got underway in December, followed by Operation Barrier Reef, which sought to connect *Tran Hung Dao* and Giant Slingshot operations across an open expanse in the western delta known as the Plain of Reeds. With Search Turn and *Tran Hung Dao* operations in the southwestern delta along the Cambodian border, Giant Slingshot operations in the Parrot's Beak region to the north, and Barrier Reef in the Plain of Reeds, Operation SEALORDS provided barriers on rivers and canals throughout the entire border area between South Vietnam and Cambodia from the Gulf of Thailand to the Vam Co Dong River (see Figure 5.1). Prior to the establishment of Operation SEALORDS, the Allies rarely visited those areas of the Mekong delta.[319]

Vice Admiral Zumwalt designed SEALORDS to utilize all available assets, naval and otherwise, in the delta for operations: the Swift boats of Market Time, the PBRs participating in Operation Game Warden, the Mobile Riverine Force, the VNMC, the ARVN and other Allied units, and the South Vietnamese Navy. November, 1968, witnessed the first combined operation that included elements of each of the Navy's three

[319] Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 372.

Figure 5.1 Mekong Delta Area

Source: Newcomb, Richard F. *A Pictorial History of the Vietnam War*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987.

task forces operating in the delta: TF 115, TF 116, and the MRF. The operation occurred in Kien Giang Province, and was implemented to curb the flow of war materiel the communists were bringing into the delta from Cambodia.[320]

As ACTOV and SEALORDS operations got underway, US Navy materiel began to be shifted to new areas of operation and reassigned to new units. Vice Admiral Zumwalt's new operations demanded more men and boats, but very little of either would be forthcoming from the United States. Instead, Zumwalt had to rely primarily on what assets and sailors he already had available in South Vietnam. As a result, the riverine craft belonging to the MRF slowly began trickling away, out of the hands of CTF 117 and into other Allied units operating elsewhere in the Mekong delta.

Operation SEALORDS demanded a lot of riverine craft, particularly those aspects of the mission that called for barrier maintenance and interdicting enemy lines of communication. Within the SEALORDS structure, the Navy established numerous barriers throughout the Mekong delta region in places where the Allies did not ordinarily operate. One barrier that would eventually absorb a lot of TF 117 craft got underway in early December, 1968, and was referred to as Operation Giant Slingshot. Giant Slingshot operations focused on interdicting Viet Cong supply lines along two major rivers north of the Mekong River in III CTZ. The operation concentrated on two large rivers that flowed into South Vietnam from Cambodia, one on either side of the Parrot's Beak, an oddly-shaped protrusion of Cambodian land jutting east toward Saigon (see Figure 5.1, page

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[320] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary November 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

158). The Americans knew the Parrot's Beak was home to several VC and PAVN sanctuaries, base camps, supply stations, and staging areas.[321] The Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong Rivers flowed through South Vietnam on either side of the Parrot's Beak, and served as a convenient means of transporting men and materiel from the Cambodian sanctuaries to assault Allied forces in the Saigon region and in the Mekong delta. By March, 1969, Giant Slingshot operations had taken dozens of riverine craft out of the delta, including all of those once belonging to RAD 92, for service on the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong Rivers.[322]

After the Tet Offensive and prior to Vice Admiral Zumwalt's arrival in South Vietnam, the MRF underwent profound changes in structure that allowed the force to be more effective as a combat unit and as an engine of pacification. In July, 1968, the Navy reconfigured its component of the MRF into two task groups: Mobile Riverine Group (MRG) Alpha and Group Bravo. Also in July, MACV insisted some elements of the MRF concentrate in Kien Hoa Province on "pacification activities of a more permanent nature than those previously undertaken."[323]

With the continued assistance of some battalions of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps, the newly reorganized MRF could not only focus on pacification operations in Kien Hoa Province, but also continue to apply pressure to Viet Cong sanctuaries and

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[321] Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 6. Shaw provides a map that indicates known enemy base camps along the Cambodian border with South Vietnam in Spring, 1970.

[322] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary March 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[323] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 169.

lines of communication in other areas of the Mekong delta. The MRF, though now concerned about and participating in efforts at pacification, also remained focused on combating guerrillas in the Mekong delta. With a reorganization of the naval component of the Mobile Riverine Force came a reorientation of mission priorities. The MRF now played a more conspicuous dual role of combat force and pacification unit.

The Navy component of the MRF was not the only one to undergo profound changes in organization upon a change in command at MACV. The Army also restructured its MRF element to coincide with the changes the Navy implemented. The Army reconfigured its MRF units to include more infantry battalions capable of conducting riverine operations. Mobile Riverine Group Alpha consisted of the 3/47, 4/47, 3/60 Infantry Battalions, and the Third Battalion, VNMC. Group Alpha, which focused now almost exclusively on pacification operations in Kien Hoa Province, made up the core of the Army's original component of the MRF.

Mobile Riverine Group Bravo contained RVNAF units, the newly established River Assault Squadrons 13 and 15, as well as a few new battalions from other American infantry regiments now capable of riverine operations after the Army authorized reorganization of the US Ninth ID in early 1968. As riverine craft continued to arrive in the delta throughout the beginning of 1968, making accommodations for the expansion of MRF operations to include more naval and infantry units proved easy. By the end of 1968, after all of the riverine craft had arrived in South Vietnam, the MRF consisted of eight RADs and two infantry brigades comprised of seven maneuver battalions capable of

operating in a riverine environment.[324] At its pinnacle in late 1968, the MRF contained approximately five thousand soldiers and sailors who supported and sustained themselves in combat operations for well over two years.[325]

Operations continued in the Mekong delta that employed elements of the MRF working in conjunction with Allied VNMC units. Throughout 1968, the MRF conducted combat missions in provinces further afield in the delta than it had ever operated before. In 1968, the MRF conducted operations in provinces such as Kien Giang, Chuong Thien, Phong Dinh, and Ba Xuyen, provinces heretofore never visited by the Mobile Riverine Force (see Figure 4.2, page 96). In July, 1968, elements of the MRF made what would be their deepest penetration into the delta ever. In an area thirty miles southwest of Can Tho, three battalions of the MRF worked on an operation designed to interdict insurgent supply lines throughout the U Minh Forest in the Camau Peninsula (see Figure 5.1, page 158) and in the Seven Mountains region near the Cambodian border. As the MRF had never contested the Viet Cong in those areas, the Allies hoped to catch the communists off guard and not prepared defensively. The guerrillas had enjoyed sanctuary in those regions for years.[326]

Working with the South Vietnamese Marines, the MRF caught the Viet Cong unprepared to resist Allied forces with much vigor. During an ensuing engagement after

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[324] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 170.

[325] Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 187.

[326] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary July 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

the MRF inserted forces into the U Minh Forest, an attached unit of Vietnamese Marines flushed some communist guerrillas into a blockade set up along a waterway in the AO that was guarded by TF 117 craft. Fifty guerrillas lost their lives in the ensuing melee.[327] In the ten days of operations in the area, the insurgents also suffered the loss of considerable quantities of weapons and supplies.[328]

Combined with combat operations, the MRF, as per ACTOV requirements, also assisted their Vietnamese allies in preparing to assume the responsibility of prosecuting the war in the delta. The end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969 witnessed the MRF working more closely and more frequently in the delta with allied South Vietnamese units. In October, 1968, American forces, anticipating an increase in participation of South Vietnamese soldiers and sailors in future SEALORDS operations, began a series of training exercises with the ARVN 21st Infantry Division and the 4th Vietnamese Marine Corps Battalion.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of their allies' abilities, the Americans simultaneously conducted a series of hydrographic surveys of various canals and waterways in the delta. A US Navy team concluded one survey of the canals in the western delta by the end of October, 1968, in anticipation of SEALORDS operations in the area around the Vinh Te Canal (Operation *Tran Hung Dao*) and the Long Xuyen

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[327] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary July 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[328] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary July 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

Canal (Operation Search Turn) in the south-western portion of the delta near the Cambodian border.[329] The surveys provided vital regional information from which the South Vietnamese would benefit in the future when operational responsibility rested solely in their hands.

Beginning in 1969, TG (or MRG) Alpha, with five RADs, a few infantry battalions, an attached artillery unit, and some VNMC elements, concentrated primarily on the pacification of Kien Hoa Province. Task Group Bravo, with three RADs, worked primarily with the VNMC in other places in the delta ranging from My Tho to Can Tho, and from the Rung Sat Special Zone to the U Minh Forest. Of the two US Navy task groups operating in the delta in 1969, Group Bravo remained the more active. Task Group Bravo operated more frequently further afield, conducting operations throughout a wider geographic range. Group Alpha's assignment primarily included pacification duties solely in Kien Hoa Province.

With an expansion of their forces, MRF operations broadened to encompass more than search and destroy operations, providing security for bases (both the MRB and Dong Tam), and interdicting Viet Cong lines of communication. After operating in the delta for over a year, the MRF mission came to include escorting Allied troops on their own sweep and ambush operations, and patrolling waterways with units from TF 116. Defoliation missions along riverbanks also occupied the Allied riverine forces after operating for a while. The MRF also found time to dabble in some psychological warfare

[329] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary October 1968, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

operations including *Chieu Hoi* leaflet drops and playing recorded messages from helicopter loudspeakers. Since MEDCAP, DENCAP, and other pacification operations got underway shortly before the Tet Offensive of early 1968, the MRF provided continuous security for Allied elements involved in civic action programs, as well.

Two events in June, 1969, affected the operational status and employment of the MRF in the Mekong delta. The Second Brigade of the US Ninth Infantry Division learned it would be redeployed incrementally to the United States later in July and August. The news came in June after President Nixon's announcement at the Midway Conference, in which he spoke of an initial US troop reduction in South Vietnam of twenty-five thousand men. Also in June, the VNN received sixty-four riverine craft, valued at over $18 million, from TF 117 as per ACTOV requirements.[330] The turnover occurred in three stages, and was completed on 21 June 1969. The exchange left the MRF with just under one hundred boats. River Assault Squadrons 9 and 11 (the two original squadrons) were decommissioned in June, leaving the MRF with only two remaining RASs: 13 and 15 (each with two RADs apiece).[331] During combat operations, the MRF claimed approximately 550 enemy guerrillas killed in June, the lowest total

[330] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary June 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[331] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary June 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

since January, 1969. The statistic indicated the tempo of MRF combat operations in the Mekong delta was beginning to slow.[332]

July, 1969, witnessed a drastic reduction in MRF operations. Primarily, the MRF now provided Dong Tam base security and accompanied elements of the First and Third Brigades, US Ninth ID, on combat operations in nearby Long An Province. In Kien Hoa Province, TG Alpha continued to assist ARVN and RF/PF units by providing fire support, escorting troops, and defoliating and/or burning away the vegetation along riverbanks. The MRF also continued providing security for medical and dental civic action excursions. Also during July, the 3rd Battalion, 60th Infantry redeployed to the United States, among the first American infantry units to do so.

The restructuring of the MRF, coupled with Vice Admiral Zumwalt's new mission priorities, facilitated the inevitable departure of the MRF from South Vietnam in July and August, 1969. When units of the Ninth Infantry Division began redeploying to the United States soon after President Nixon's announcement of a troop reduction, the threat of US Navy riverine craft sitting idle in the delta never materialized. Vice Admiral Zumwalt had Operation SEALORDS going, which absorbed some craft formerly used by the MRF prior to its complete withdrawal. Other excess riverine craft filtered away to the VNN through the ACTOV program while the pace of MRF operations slowed. When the Army element of the MRF began to dissolve, the Navy had uses for their riverine craft in other operations being conducted elsewhere in III- and IV CTZ.

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[332] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary June 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Also see Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, 178.

The MRF officially disbanded in August, 1969, when the remaining infantry units of the Second Brigade, Ninth Infantry Division returned to the United States. On 25 August, Task Force 194 units conducting SEALORDS operations received the remaining TF 117 craft. On that day, Task Force 117 was phased out of existence. Whatever craft remained, ACTOV claimed and eventually handed over to the burgeoning South Vietnamese Navy. Also, as a result of President Nixon's troop reduction announcement, the first three hundred thirty sailors of twelve hundred went home in August, 1969.[333]

Six American presidents came into and went out of office while the United States was involved in the affairs of South Vietnam (1950-1975).[334] Few imagined at the outset that American involvement would span such a period of time. Several generals and admirals also presided over American military affairs in South Vietnam during US participation in the war against the communists. Despite the turnover in leadership and command, several American policymakers advocated staying the course in Southeast Asia and remained committed to the task of assisting the South Vietnamese in resisting the perils of international communism.

During the years of American involvement in South Vietnam, the MRF made several important contributions to the war effort, and made many significant adaptations

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[333] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary August 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[334] When the United States decided to assist France monetarily in 1950, Harry Truman was in the White House. American military advisors arrived in South Vietnam throughout Dwight Eisenhower's two terms in office during the 1950s. President John F. Kennedy sent more advisors to South Vietnam in the early 1960s. President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated American involvement in the mid-1960s. Richard Nixon presided over the American withdrawal from South Vietnam through the early 1970s. Finally, Gerald Ford witnessed the last of the Americans to leave South Vietnam as Saigon fell in April, 1975.

to its original concept while it operated. Upon examining the terrain, the environment, and the myriad requirements for governmental stability in the Mekong delta, the original planners of the Mobile Afloat Force concept provided the necessary vision needed to assist the RVNAF in countering the growing insurgency in the delta. Much of the original plan was based on the experience of the French *dinassauts* on the rivers of Vietnam during the First Indochina War (1946-1954); however, the US Army and the US Navy injected new ideas and innovations that transformed the original concept into the formidable Mobile Riverine Force.

The US Navy contributed to the MRF a fleet consisting of a variety of converted ships and craft. Not all of the Navy's riverine craft received modifications, but of those converted, most were of World War II vintage. The ASPBs remained the only craft built from the keel up for service with the MRF in South Vietnam. The ATCs, in particular, proved to be very versatile craft. Not only were the ATCs fitted with better defensive mechanisms such as iron bars, but many were also rigged with helicopter landing pads and some served as floating battalion aid stations.

The Navy provided the requisite riverine assault craft, and furnished the MRF with a variety of ships and craft that served as a floating base for the sailors and infantrymen. Many of the ships that made up the MRB also required significant alterations prior to service on the rivers and canals of the Mekong delta. Despite all the initial requirements demanded of the Navy prior to MRF operations, the Navy responded and proved ready to conduct combat operations when called.

The United States Army contributed to the overall operational ability of the MRF as well. The Army experimented with barge mounted artillery, which, upon finding a viable solution, consistently provided needed fire support for infantrymen in the field. Soldiers also provided the MRB with security and assisted with boat repairs and other riverine maintenance projects. Army engineers also built Dong Tam on land that did not exist prior to a massive dredging operation. Dong Tam served a vital function as a headquarters for the Ninth Infantry Division while it remained in South Vietnam.

Together, the two service branches, unaccustomed to conducting joint riverine combat operations since the American Civil War (1861-1865), also created a command structure that provided for and facilitated mutual support and cooperation. With an efficient leadership structure in place, combined with effective leaders, the MRF thrived in the Mekong delta and met with considerable success, despite the adverse conditions. Throughout its operational life, the MRF remained one of the most effective and successful American combat units in South Vietnam. In July, 1969, during a ceremony aboard the USS *Benewah*, the MRF received the coveted Presidential Unit Citation for action during the 1968 Tet Offensive.[335]

During combat operations, the MRF experienced some setbacks. In the beginning, when the MRF began combat operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone against communist guerrillas in February, 1967, the force did not meet with its initial high expectations. One reason for a lack of immediate success at eliminating the insurgency

[335] U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam: Monthly Historical Summary July 1969, United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summaries, 1966 – 1972, 1973, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

from the Rung Sat was that some of the guerrilla units in the region had previous combat experience against Americans. Operation Jackstay had been conducted in the Rung Sat in early 1966 and the Viet Cong undoubtedly learned valuable lessons from their encounter with the United States Marine Corps.

On the other hand, when the MRF moved units into the provinces of the Mekong delta for the first time in April, 1967, the force experienced greater initial success against the Viet Cong insurgents than it did in the previous two months of operating in the Rung Sat. There are at least two reasons why the MRF experienced more initial success in the delta as opposed to the Rung Sat. The guerrillas in the Mekong delta had never encountered a fighting unit quite like the MRF, with its rapid maneuverability and powerful striking capabilities. The guerrillas had grown accustomed to operating with impunity in some parts of the delta in the early stages of the war, as they met with little resistance from the local ARVN units.

Furthermore, by the time the MRF moved into the delta, the Army and Navy components had had two months of experience working jointly in combat and had resolved some of the initial command and control issues that may have caused the unit to be less effective during its first combat operations in the Rung Sat. As such, the initial forays into the Mekong delta against the communists met with more recognizable success.

The guerrillas in the Mekong delta had enjoyed sanctuary in the region for years prior to the arrival of the Americans. The ARVN merely held the line and did not aggressively pursue the insurgents with the aim of destroying the communists' ability to

undermine the GVN.[336] As a result, when the MRF arrived in the Mekong delta and began aggressive combat operations, the guerrillas were unprepared to meet the initial challenge. Over time, though, the communists developed tactics and strategies for dealing with the power and capabilities of the MRF.

By the summer of 1967, as a reaction to the arrival of the MRF, the guerrillas in the delta had gone underground, or had taken certain measures to ensure their activities had become less conspicuous. The MRF soon began experiencing difficulty in making contact with large numbers of insurgents. The communists could very easily blend into the local delta population, and the Americans frequently experienced difficulty in distinguishing friendly delta peasants from hostile Viet Cong guerrillas. As a result, in the summer months of 1967, the MRF intelligence officers believed the guerrillas were experiencing their own difficulty in adjusting to the new American tactics, and were operating at a reduced combat effectiveness on the battlefield.[337]

On the contrary, the Viet Cong had adjusted to the MRF and realized that challenging the Americans in a set battle would be suicidal. The Viet Cong were guerrillas and their movement was an insurgency designed to eventually overthrow the Saigon government. As such, they would accomplish their goals over a long period of time by dissolving the will of the Americans to stay in the fight rather than sweeping the

[336] Riverine Operations in the Delta (May 68 – Jun 69). CHECO Report Number 179, 6-7.

[337] Combat Operations AAR – OPORD 58-67 (Tiger Coronado IV), 2 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Also see Combat Operations AAR – OPORD 59-67 (Tiger Coronado IV), 2 September 1967, RG472 – US Army in Vietnam, Infantry Units: 3/47, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), Box 4, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

US military from the field with a series of decisive battlefield results. In the Mekong delta, the guerrillas contented themselves by biding their time with an eye to the future when they would generate the popular uprising envisioned by the North Vietnamese communists and their allies in the south, the NLF.

By giving the impression of weakened forces and frequently waiting for the right opportunity to strike, the Viet Cong lulled the MRF into a false sense of accomplishment. Just as the MRF believed its opponent was crippled, the Viet Cong struck in September, 1967, along the Rach Ba Rai River, and exacted a tremendous toll for American complacency. The Viet Cong, in the heaviest fighting to date between them and the Mobile Riverine Force, demonstrated they were not incapacitated, and could inflict severe damage on MRF men and materiel.

Eventually, a pattern emerged that lasted until early 1968. The MRF would act upon recent intelligence and proceed to a particular destination to exploit the information in an attempt to harm the insurgency. Along the way, a very small group of guerrillas with small arms and rockets could easily ambush the riverine column and stall its progress. If attacked, the MRF was obliged to stop and investigate the contact. As such, a group of three to ten guerrillas could inhibit the progress of an entire American battalion, giving the insurgents upstream time to escape. Not long after combat operations got underway in the delta in April, 1967, the MRF found itself coerced into the role of a reactionary force.

The MRF, despite all its technical and tactical innovations, battlefield success, and offensive capabilities did not completely incapacitate the Viet Cong in the Mekong

delta. The MRF, instead, while it operated, made life exceedingly difficult for the guerrillas and complicated their task of waging war against the GVN in the delta. At the conclusion of the Tet Offensive, General Westmoreland credited the MRF with having "saved the delta."[338] Even though the MRF did not always make contact with the insurgents on operations, large quantities of enemy supplies were often discovered. As a result, the Viet Cong undoubtedly suffered materiel deprivation at the hands of the MRF, thus complicating their task of instigating the general uprising designed to topple the government in Saigon.

The Viet Cong did not often deliberately expose themselves to the MRF. They knew they were going to need every able-bodied man to spark the General Uprising envisioned by the communists during the Tet holidays in early 1968. When, during the battles of Tet, the Viet Cong did appear on the battlefield in large groups, the MRF eliminated great numbers of guerrillas. When the Viet Cong struck several major urban areas in the Mekong delta simultaneously on 31 January 1968, the MRF, due to its excellent mobility and firepower, as well as its experience, countered the communist attack at every junction, thus breaking the back of the insurgents' offensive. As a result, the guerrillas never managed to generate their popular uprising in the delta and bring down the Saigon government. When the end came for South Vietnam, it was not from a mass of disaffected Mekong delta peasants whipped into a frenzy by communist propaganda. At the end of the war, in April, 1975, Saigon fell after an extensive,

[338] Riverine Warfare: The U. S. Navy's Operations on Inland Waters, 1969, Folder 06, Box 04, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11 - Monographs, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

conventional invasion by the People's Army of North Vietnam. Beginning in the Central Highlands region, the communists severed South Vietnam into two halves prior to launching the invasion from the north. Saigon fell after every other major city in South Vietnam had fallen during the communists' southward thrust from across the DMZ in the north in early 1975. Saigon eventually did fall to the communists on 30 April 1975. With the fall of the city, the communists claimed not only reunification of Vietnam after nearly twenty years of armed conflict, but also victory over the United States.

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