

# *Controlling the* **RUNG SAT SPECIAL ZONE**

To keep open the crucial shipping channel between Saigon and the South China Sea, control of this dense mangrove swamp was essential.

By Captain Carl A. Nelson, U.S. Navy (ret.)

**N**o history of the Vietnam War would be complete if it did not tell the story of the protection of the Long Tau River, the most strategic shipping channel in South Vietnam. By controlling that river and the surrounding swampy region, called the Rung Sat—which translated, depending on who did the translation, to either “Killer Forest” or “Forest of Assassins”—the South Vietnamese and their American advisers contributed significantly to the war effort. Despite repeated enemy efforts to close it, the Long Tau stayed open during the entire war.

The Long Tau channel, which remains to this day the only deep-draft water route from the South China Sea to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), is a dredged connection of three rivers: the Saigon, the Nha Be and the Long Tau. During the war, 95 percent of all supplies entering South Vietnam arrived by surface vessels, and one-third of those critical cargoes came on military munitions ships and civilian oil tankers by way of the Long Tau channel through the port of Saigon or the Shell Oil terminal at Nha Be.

The channel had always had military significance. During World War II the Japanese patrolled it. After that war, the French navy took control with a river assault group, whose main task was to stop pirates and robbers who preyed on ships and boats. In 1955, the



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South Vietnamese, using combined air force, navy and infantry under the Ngo Dinh regime, fought and defeated the Binh Xuyen gang in the Rung Sat.

Communist guerrilla activity began in the early 1950s. Then known as the Viet Minh, these guerrillas began, without causing alarm, to build well-concealed bases with bunkers and trenches throughout the Rung Sat. Their efforts to close the channel began in the first Indochina War, and would continue throughout the second Indochina War.

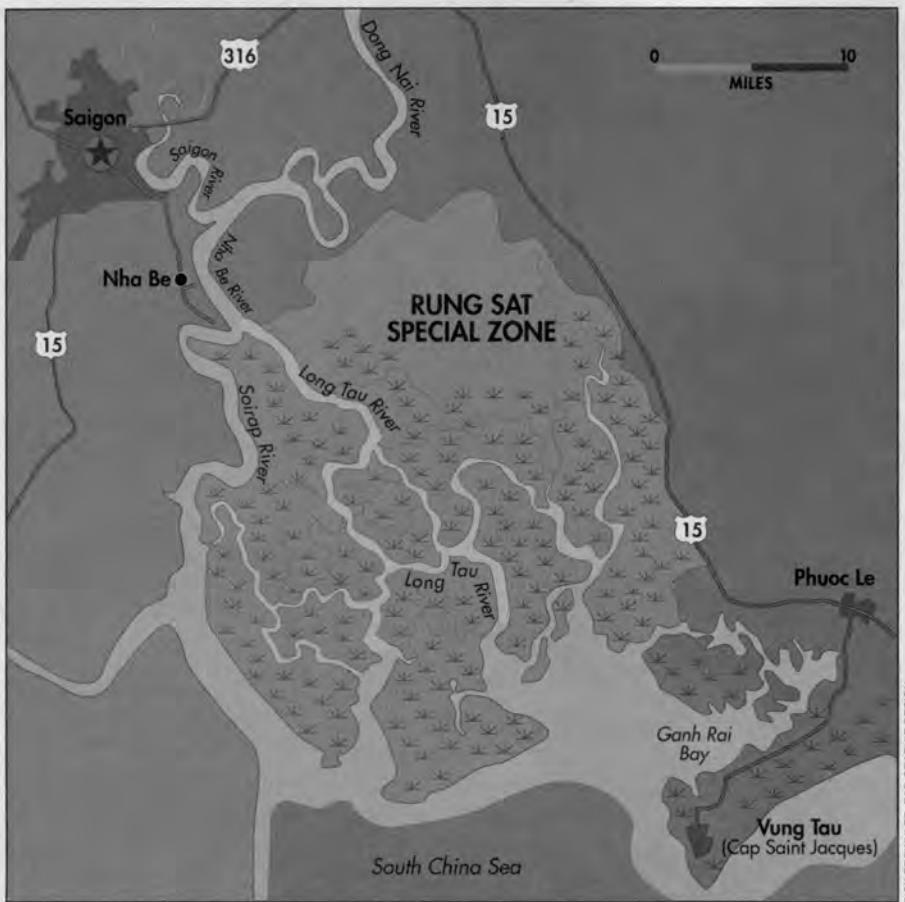
Because many areas of the Rung Sat Special Zone were impenetrable and unfeasible for ground operations, it was necessary to use a combined water-and-air mobile force to control the area. The terrain was mostly bayou or swamp, with 3,600 miles of creeks, rivers and canals. Eighty-five percent of the area was covered by dense mangrove swamp and jungle. Roads were practically nonexistent, and people moved from



**Above:** U.S. Marine Pfc. Brent Fox serves as radioman during a patrol in the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ) during Operation Jackstay on March 26, 1966. **Left:** A U.S. Navy sea-air-land (SEAL) team comes ashore at Nha Be during a combined operation in the RSSZ.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES



place to place by boat or sampan. Needless to say, movement of troops was always difficult because of the dense foliage and thick mud.

In December 1962, the government of South Vietnam formed the Dac Khu Rung Sat, or Rung Sat Spe-

cial Zone (RSSZ), by transferring the districts of Quang Xuyen and Can Gio from the Gia Dinh province and placing them under the tactical command of the Vietnamese navy (VNN). However, pacification remained the responsibility of the Gia Dinh province chief. The zone thus became the only tactical sector under VNN military control; a Vietnamese naval commander (*Trung Ta*), and later a captain (*Dai Ta*), were placed in command. Headquarters was Nha Be, not far from where the Long Tau River forked from the Nha Be River some 7½ miles southeast of Saigon. The pie-shaped zone extended southwest over a 400-square-mile area split in half by the 26-mile Long Tau channel. The mouth of the Long Tau was near the mouth of the Soirap River, but the Soirap was too shallow to be used by oceangoing ships trying to bring cargo to the port at Saigon.

The strategic significance of the Long Tau channel was not lost on the enemy, who tried everything to shut it down. From prisoners interrogated in April 1966 it was learned that the enemy had created its own special zone, which matched the RSSZ. They called their zone T-10, or *Doan* 10 (Group 10). According to captured documents, the initial commander of the guerrillas was a senior colonel of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) who had previously served as commanding officer (CO)

of an artillery regiment. He was headquartered in underground air-raid bunkers and trenches near the village of Phuoc Le in the Nhon Trach district of Bien Hoa province. *Doan* 10 was responsible for attacking ships transiting the Long Tau channel, shelling Sai-

## The Swamp Rats

On May 21, 1966, the 1st Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, launched Operation Lexington III, becoming the first U.S. combat force to conduct military operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ). Moving from its base camp at Bearcat southeast of Saigon, each of its rifle companies spent two days in the swamps conducting saturation patrolling, ambushes and search-and-destroy operations. This was followed by two days as the battalion ready reaction force, two days drying out at Vung Tau, then back into the jungle for another rotation.

The operation ended on June 9, 1966, resulting in one American killed in action, four Americans wounded in action, and 41

Viet Cong (VC) killed. Dubbed the "Swamp Rats," the battalion returned to the RSSZ on September 4, 1966, to conduct Operation Baton Rouge. Numerous enemy facilities were found and destroyed before the operation ended on October 8, 1966.

In January 1967, the 1st Infantry Division elements at Bearcat were replaced by the newly arrived 9th Infantry Division. The division's 2nd Brigade, commanded by Colonel (later Lt. Gen.) William B. Fulton, was slated to become the principal ground element of the newly formed Mobile Riverine Force (MRF).

Fulton would later detail the operations of that force in his monograph, *Riverine Operations 1966-1969*, published in 1973

as part of the Army Center for Military History's Vietnam Studies series. As he related, the RSSZ was to be the initial test of the riverine concept. On February 15, 1967, after a VC attack on a freighter navigating the Long Tau shipping channel, the brigade's 3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry, along with a 105mm battery from the 2nd Battalion, 4th Artillery, and the U.S. Navy's River Assault Division 91, was ordered to commence combat operations in the RSSZ.

Named River Raider I, it was the first joint operation by U.S. Army and Navy units that would characterize the MRF. Additional support came from the Vietnamese Navy's River Assault Group 26, which provided minesweepers and escorts for movement on narrow and dangerous waterways.

"Boats of River Assault Division 91 moved troops to and from the barracks ships by ar-

mored troops carriers at all hours of the day and night, delivering them primarily to friendly ambush sites," Fulton wrote. "Ambushes were found to be most successful on well-traveled waterways....The common rule that an ambush should be moved after being tripped did not always apply to water ambushes in the Rung Sat Special Zone. On one occasion, an ambush was tripped three times in one night, with the result that seven of the enemy were killed and three sampans and two weapons captured.

"For operations on small waterways, plastic assault boats were useful. [In addition] the battalion used one 27-foot engineer boat and several 13-man inflatable rubber rafts to advantage, but they, like the plastic assault boats, offered no protection from small arms fire and their slow speed and the inevitable bunching of troops made

gon, and disrupting the South Vietnamese government's pacification program by using intimidating and harassing tactics. The group organized Communist Party chapters in every village, mirroring the South Vietnamese government structures with the so-called VCI (Viet Cong Infrastructure). They also captured or eliminated the local South Vietnamese militias and assassinated village and hamlet officials.

*Doan 10* was composed of seven units (*Dois*) designated 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10. *Dois* 2, 3 and 5 were responsible for *Khu* (area) "A"; their task was to attempt to control the northwestern Rung Sat rivers: Dong Tranh, Dong Kho, Ong Keo and the Long Tau. *Dois* 7, 8, 9 and 10 were responsible for *Khu* "B," which consisted of the lower Long Tau and other rivers in the southeastern Rung Sat.

Each of these enemy areas had a battalion-type command group and three main force sapper-infantry companies, which were composed largely of North Vietnamese troops sent to South Vietnam on a three-year enlistment. They were well trained and had a formidable strike capability, which included recoilless rifles, B-40 rockets, mortars, .51- and .30-caliber machine guns, water mines and, during the last years of the war (1971-73), the Soviet AT-3 manpack antitank missile.

The personnel assigned included at least 14 women, who were mostly used to carry, set, aim and fire mortars, B-40s and Russian-made AT-3 wire-guided rockets. In addition, local Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas were recruited and trained to supplement their ranks. A VC village infrastructure with its supporting military arm (a local guerrilla platoon) existed for every South Vietnamese village in the Rung Sat. The estimated strength

them highly vulnerable. Water movement was essential, however, since the Viet Cong moved primarily by sampan; no amount of trudging through mangrove swamps would outmaneuver an enemy who sought to avoid contact.

"Fire support was diverse and highly effective. Artillery fire support bases were established with as many as three separate artillery batteries (105-mm towed) employed at the same time from different locations. Naval gunfire support was used continuously throughout the operation, including indirect fire of several destroyers and the direct and indirect fire of weapons organic to boats of Division 91, U.S. Navy, and River Assault Group 26, Vietnamese Navy. Other fire support was provided by tactical air, and by U.S. Air Force, Army and Navy fixed-wing and helicopter gunships."

Soldiers carried only essential equipment. "The normal load consisted of seven magazines for the M16 rifle, 200 rounds for the machine gun, and twelve rounds of 40-mm grenades," Fulton wrote. "Each squad carried 100 feet of nylon rope, a 10-foot rope with snaplinks per man, and a grappling hook with 50-feet of line—items that were invaluable in water crossing operations as well as detonating booby traps.

"Troops on combat operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone were continually in mud and the salty, dirty water could not be used for bathing. Certain measures were therefore taken to safeguard the health of the troops. Men stayed on combat operations for forty-eight hours at a time and were then sent to the troopers in the Vung Tau area where adequate shower facilities were available and every man had a bunk for the night.

of *Doan 10* varied from almost 100, including the guerrillas, in early 1969, to about 400 in 1970, to less than 100 by the time the Americans pulled out in 1973.

American naval forces joined in the effort to protect the channel's many brown-water curves as early as August 1964, and in March 1966, Operation Jackstay, a combined U.S. Navy-U.S. Marine Corps amphibious operation was conducted in the RSSZ. The results were seven U.S. killed and wounded and 53 VC killed, as confirmed by actual body count.

In April 1969, the two U.S. Army advisory teams under the U.S. senior adviser in the Rung Sat were replaced by U.S. Navy-U.S. Marine Corps teams. About that same time, river patrol boats (PBRs) arrived and were organized under the River Patrol Force (TF-116). The senior adviser then also wore the hat of commander, RSSZ River Patrol Group. U.S. Marine Major Bronars became the first RSSZ senior adviser and

All companies received instruction on the care of the feet, which included thorough washing, drying, and daily inspection by medics.

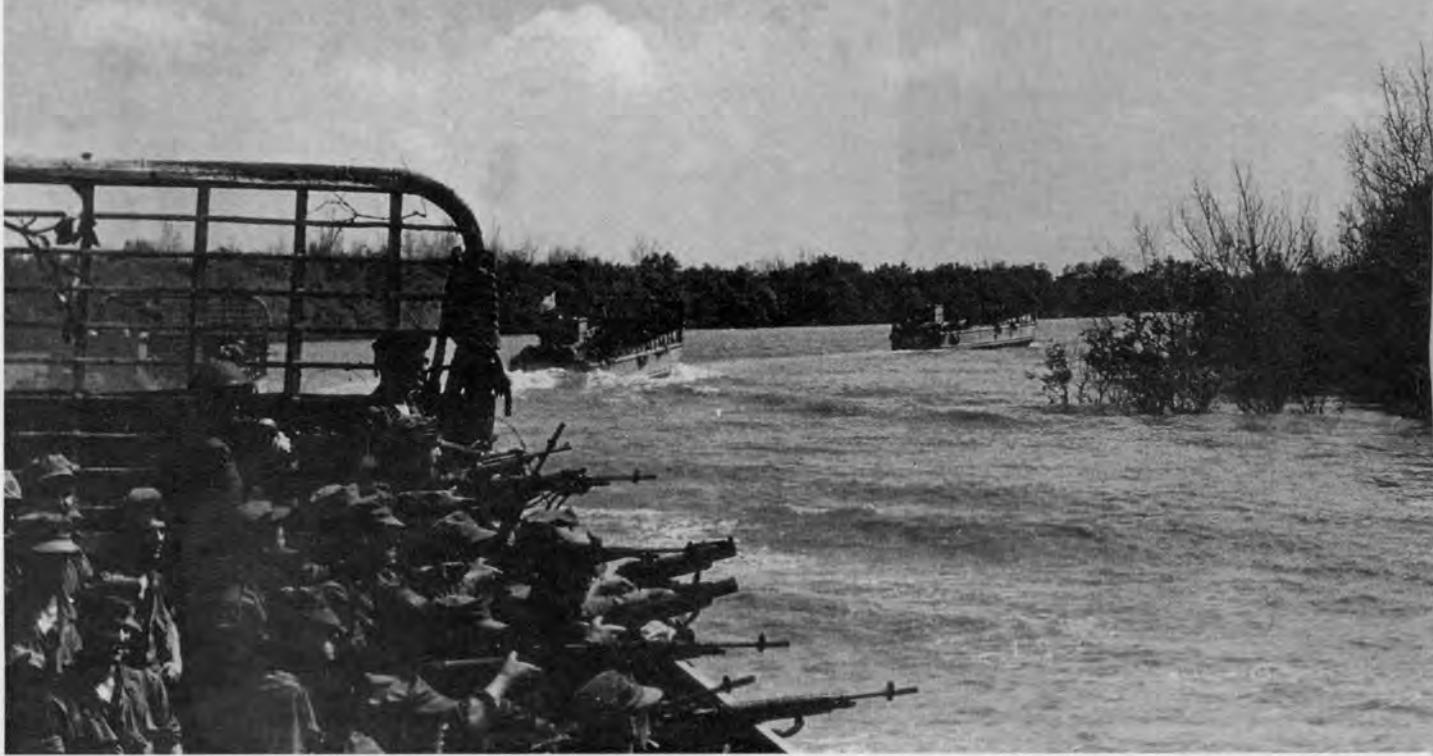
"The major operational success of River Raider I [which terminated on March 20, 1967] was the capture of substantial stores of water mines and the destruction of facilities for constructing water mines. It is highly probable that these losses suffered by the Viet Cong account in part for the very limited use of water mines against riverine forces during later operations in the northern Mekong Delta as well as in the Rung Sat Special Zone."

After River Raider I, the Mobile Riverine Force would return to the RSSZ later that year in Operation Coronado III. "As the MRF returned...for further operations in late June, during July and again in late August [1967]," said the com-

**Opposite Page:**  
Designated Doan 10 by the Communists, the RSSZ was 400 square miles of swampland in which guerrillas could strike, run and hide.  
**Above:** A South Vietnamese Monitor makes its way toward the RSSZ to provide riverine support for Operation Jackstay.



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*Weapons at the ready, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops move into the RSSZ aboard landing craft.*

leader of the Navy-Marine Corps effort in 1966; he was succeeded by U.S. Navy commanders Wandres, Straney, Wages, Williams, Stuart, Armel and Nelson, whose service ended with the U.S. pullout in 1973.

The U.S. military took on the mission of securing the RSSZ, and in particular defending and ensuring the security of the Long Tau shipping channel. The Americans were to conduct tactical operations to destroy the enemy, and provide direction and support for the pacification effort, including the civil administration of the two districts: Quang Xuyen in the west and Can Gio in the east.

Two district intelligence squads, a provisional reconnaissance unit (PRU) and a Navy SEAL (sea-air-land) platoon based at Nha Be and later at Cat Lai, were used throughout the war on various intelligence missions. The resourcefulness of the intelligence program, including the PRU/Phoenix and Psyops (psychological operations) programs, strengthened the effectiveness of RSSZ operations. Typically intelligence squads were sent to capture and interrogate the VC or their sympathizers in an effort to keep current on enemy capability and intentions.

Rung Sat tactics were tailored to meet particular situations and were the epitome of a joint team effort. Day-to-day operations consisted of patrolling the main rivers and inspecting transiting watercraft for contraband or the movement of guerrillas.

Ground forces assigned to the RSSZ consisted of South Vietnamese Regional Force companies, Popular Force platoons and People's Self Defense Force troops, which were available for local security and offensive operations. Navy assets included 70-plus Navy/VNN boats under the operational control of the commander of the RSSZ in collaboration with his senior adviser. U.S. Navy Seawolves, flying Bell UH-1

gunships stationed at the Nha Be heliport, were used for direct support, and Rockwell OV-10 Black Ponies stationed at Vung Tau were used for close air support.

Because of the nature of their missions, guerrillas had to move at night; therefore, night ambushes and waterborne guard posts were used regularly. The primary strike method consisted of air-mobile and water-mobile offensive operations. Navy Bell HAL-3 Seawolves gunships and VAL-4 Black Ponies (OV-10s) were primary air support. Other assets on call from Tan Son Nhut Air Base and Cam Ranh Bay Air Force Base consisted of McDonald Douglas F-4 and North American F-100 fighter-bombers, Lockheed AC-130 Spectres, Fairchild AC-119 Stingers, Douglas AC-47 "Spooky" fixed-wing gunships, and Bell UH-1 Nighthawks.

The Long Tau channel was segmented into six patrol zones, with two PBRs assigned to each zone on a 24-hour basis. Their primary objective was to provide escort of "special interest" shipping (tankers and ammo ships) and surveillance of the river traffic. Minesweepers with mechanical sweep gear traveled in pairs, one on each side of the Long Tau approximately 100 yards from each other. Pairs of sweeps departed Nha Be or Cat Lai (after 1970) at about 0800, 1200, 2000 and 2400 hours daily, providing overlapping coverage. However, an MSB (minesweeper, river) conducted a check-sweep for influence mines on the Long Tau every third day. Two minesweeps provided continuous nonoverlapping patrols on the Soirap River.

During the period from June 24, 1969, to February 28, 1970, 22 units, attached to the RSSZ River Patrol Group and superbly led by then Commander Jerry Wages, U.S. Navy, were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

The most formidable strike operation used in the Rung Sat was based on the airmobile concept. The

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striking force consisted of half an assault helicopter company, two gunships, four troop transports, a forward air controller (FAC), naval gunfire liaison officers and a "hunter/killer team" (a light observation helicopter and a Cobra gunship). The airmobile operation was the most successful in inflicting maximum enemy casualties and destroying enemy base camps and structures. These operations were often supported by waterborne tactics consisting of assault, patrolling, blocking, fire support, ferrying, medevac, communications relays, harbor sites, POW collection, troop resupply and extraction.

A typical RSSZ airmobile operation began on D-minus-5 when intelligence collection and plans

were developed and coordinated with the South Vietnamese. After the operation was approved by the RSSZ commander, the senior tactical adviser and the overall tactical commander conducted a visual reconnaissance of the area on D-minus 1. At daybreak on D-day, the command and control (C&C) helicopter, followed by the FAC, several front-firing UH-1 gunships, and the transport helos, took off.

After marking the helicopter landing zone with smoke, the C&C and FAC stayed at about 1,000 feet. When the transports were about 1,500 feet from the landing zone, the airstrike conducted the softening up with rockets and miniguns. The transports were allowed 10 seconds to discharge their troops and get out before the next transport arrived. Helo gunships remained in the area on call, just in case. After the troops secured the adjacent area, they moved out in the most productive direction under the coordination of the tactical commander who was observing from the C&C helicopter.

The second most powerful strike operation used in the RSSZ involved the water-mobile concept. Based on intelligence, a task force was typically formed of the specific kinds of river craft needed for the enemy situation. A task organization might include a command ship, four RPCs (river patrol craft), an LCM (landing craft, medium), four ASPBs (assault support patrol boats), a Zippo flamethrower and four PBRs. Because each craft had a different speed and draft, they left their berths at different times so that they would arrive at the objective in the Rung Sat or upper Saigon River in time for a coordinated strike.

When the strike force arrived at the designated area, the watercraft moved into a cordon position under cover of darkness. After embarking their troops, assault boats stood by to conduct amphibious operations at first light. Any suspicious craft were captured and checked for contraband, weapons or false I.D. cards. Detainees were collected and towed with their sampans to a predetermined point where they were checked by local police. The troops were inserted in predetermined areas and conducted searches. When the troops completed their search, they re-embarked and were landed in a new area.

The VC moved at night using the sampan, a 20-foot craft with a 10-inch draft, propelled by a horizontal-thrust 6-hp Briggs & Stratton engine, pole or

*The last Americans assigned to the RSSZ at Nha Be in December 1972, including Commander Carl A. Nelson (kneeling, fourth from left). Soon afterward, control of the zone was placed entirely in the hands of the South Vietnamese.*





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**Top:** North American OV-10A Broncos of U.S. Navy light attack squadron VAL-4 search for signs of the enemy in the RSSZ in June 1969. **Above:** A landing team from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, rushes clear of the Sikorsky H-34 helicopter that has placed them in the RSSZ.

oar at a speed of 6 knots. These sampans did not typically travel on main streams (they were too well patrolled), in the rain (the sampans flooded easily and sank), or when there was no moon (it was difficult to navigate in the dark); nor did they travel against the tide (the current was often 8 knots).

The sampans moved no later at night than 2200 and used patterned routes. Therefore, the best ambushes were set up downtime from suspected enemy base camps on minor, well-used side streams. The ambushing force usually struck at medium or high tide on moonlit nights between sunset and midnight when there was no more than a light rain falling.

The insertion was made by any craft from an ASPB to a sampan, depending on the depth of the stream and the troop lift requirement. For purposes of ambush siting and troop re-embarkation, tidal effects were the most vital aspect of an ambush. The kill zone was typically sited at stream junctions, and a prearranged signal, such as a flare, a Claymore mine detonation or machine-gun fire, triggered the ambush. Grenades and mines were thrown at any evading swimmers. After springing a successful ambush, the troops cleared the area of any evidence (to reduce chance of alerting the next enemy element that entered the kill zone), and

the boat and squad made a rendezvous for return to base.

The first major ground operation in the Rung Sat was conducted in 1965 by Vietnamese Regional Force troops under the command of and supported by the VNN. The second operation was conducted during Operation Jackstay. Its forces penetrated deep into both the Can Gio and Quang Xuyen districts, resulting in many VC bases being destroyed and large supply caches being captured or destroyed.

A major element of the success enjoyed by the Americans and South Vietnamese in protecting the Long Tau channel and other strategic rivers during the remainder of the war was the result of an extensive defoliation program that cleared a wide swath the entire length of the Long Tau of any dense jungle that could have concealed attacks on shipping. The first defoliation was carried out along the banks in 1965. In 1966, 1967 and almost every year thereafter, including 1972, the last year of American troop participation in the war, the banks were again sprayed with defoliants.

From mid-1969, the enemy casualties among Doan 10 personnel were so high that cadres and soldiers were ordered to disperse very thinly to avoid casualties. They took to living three to a hideout in dense, nipa palm areas. In 1970 alone, there were 188 VC killed or captured in action. After the American-South Vietnamese operations of 1970, VC forces were demoralized.

Over the course of the war only one ship, *Baton Rouge Victory*, was sunk, on August 23, 1966. Another merchant ship, a large oil tanker, went aground in 1972, but neither ship obstructed the flow of vital supplies. From a high of about two shipping attacks each week in 1966-67, the VC were reduced to less than one every two months by the end of the war. In short, the combined efforts of the brave sailors and Marines who conducted the day-to-day river patrols, the many small intelligence and ground unit strikes that kept the VC off-balance, and the constant attrition by the airmobile and water-mobile operations all helped make the Rung Sat one of the most successful operations of the war.

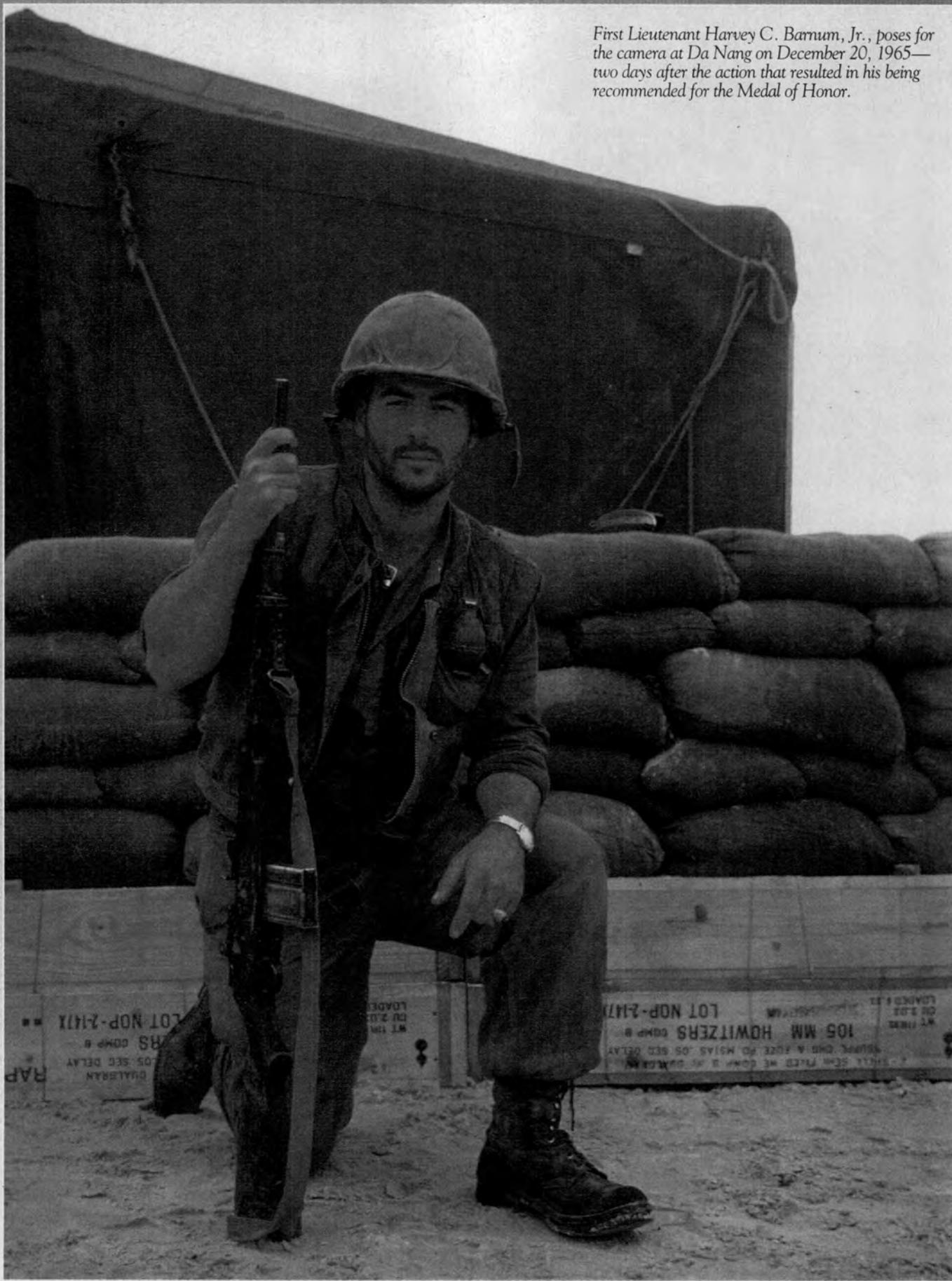
The last RSSZ advisory team pulled out on February 11, 1973. During the later stages of U.S. involvement, the advisers turned over their boats and their equipment to their South Vietnamese counterparts and successfully trained the Vietnamese navy to the point that the Rung Sat Special Zone held until the very end. □

*Captain Carl Nelson was the last U.S. senior adviser to the Rung Sat Special Zone. Captains C. Jerry Wages and James G. Williams, U.S. Navy, and Colonel E.V. Bodolato, U.S. Marine Corps, helped in the preparation of this article. For further reading, see: By Sea, Air and Land, by Edward J. Marolda (Naval Historical Center); Riverine Operations, by Lt. Gen. William B. Fulton (Center for Military History); and Brown Waters, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam, by Thomas J. Cutler (Naval Institute Press).*

Troops of the U.S. Army 9th Infantry Division disembark from their landing craft during their 10-month participation in operations in the RSSZ, between 1969 and 1970.



First Lieutenant Harvey C. Barnum, Jr., poses for the camera at Da Nang on December 20, 1965—two days after the action that resulted in his being recommended for the Medal of Honor.



COURTESY OF HARVEY C. BARNUM, JR.