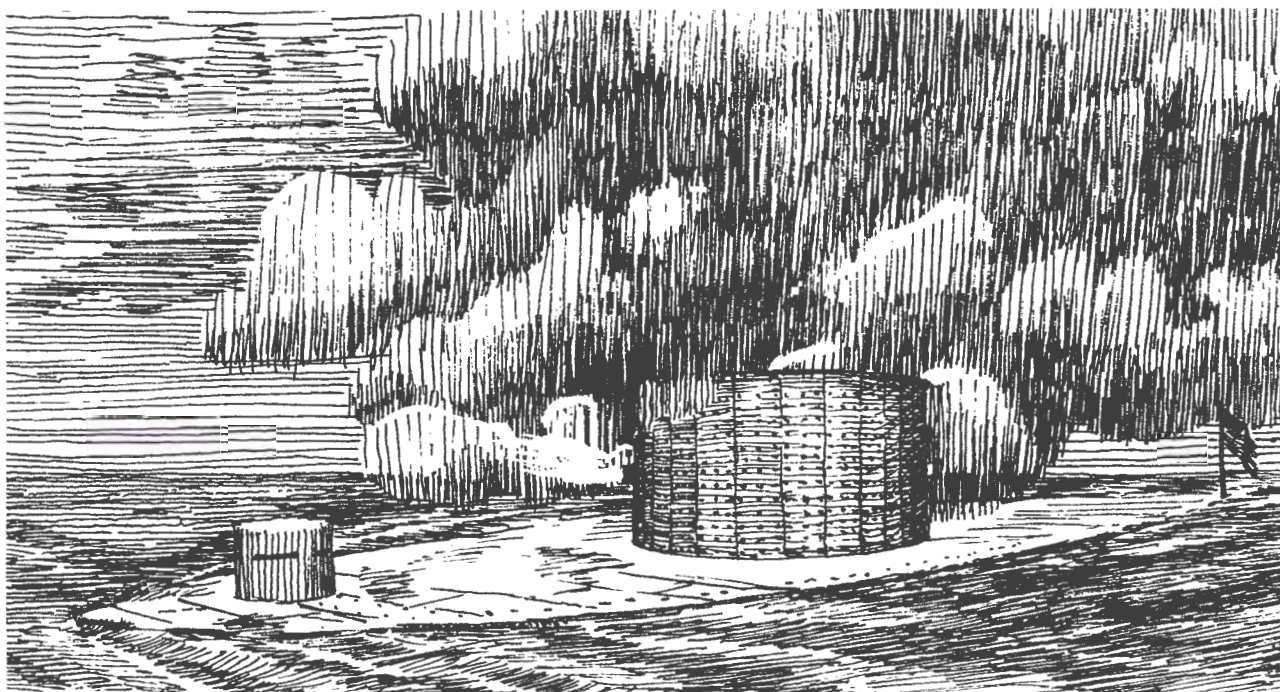


# AMERICA'S SECOND

By SP5 Ted Tindall

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Civil War Monitor slices blockades on the Mississippi Delta

ROHRBACH

*100 years later, 9th Division applies similar concepts*

Six months of combat operations by a powerful striking unit known as the Mobile Riverine Force have accounted for over 1,300 enemy deaths in the upper reaches of Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The Mobile Riverine Force, combining maneuver units of the 9th Infantry Division's 2d Brigade and U.S. Naval vessels of Task Force 117, is based upon concepts and strategy developed during the Mississippi Delta Campaign of the Civil War. Modernized adaptations of land-water warfare have carried the American unit, the second riverine warfare in the nation's history, to lopsided victories over Viet Cong battalions that once considered the Mekong marshlands and waterways their prized sanctuary.

## A CIVIL WAR HERITAGE

In the fall of 1862, General Ulysses Grant packed 32,000 weary Union soldiers onto river boats and began the siege

of the vital Confederate city of Vicksburg. Using the Mississippi Delta waterways to position Navy gunboats and to transport men and equipment, the superior Northern forces penetrated the river strongholds.

General Grant's forces teaming with Rear Admiral David Porter's Mobile Riverine Force (MRF) carried the North's offensive deep into Dixie. Fleets of armor-protected boats provided fire support and ferried troops as the Union assaulted the series of fortifications along the Mississippi.

Thundering volleys from Naval gunboats and mortar vessels played a decisive role in the North's successful winter and spring campaign of 1862 and 1863. After the defeat of the Confederates in the battle of Port Gibson on April 30, the fortress of Vicksburg fell on July 4. River assaults also played dominant roles as key Union victories claimed Belmont, Fort Henry, and Shiloh. Riverine warfare virtually split the Confederacy in two.





**Naval Assault Patrol Boat in the Mekong Delta**

KIRK

*sleek gunboats provide firepower for MRF*

### 100 YEARS & 10,000 MILES

Today, ten-thousand miles from the muddy banks of the Mississippi and a century later, U.S. Army infantrymen of the 9th Division and a companion force from the Navy's Task Force 117 are employing river tactics based upon plans of Civil War strategists. The setting for the 20th Century MRF is the Mekong Delta with its hundreds of waterways twisting from the Tibetan Plateau through fertile Vietnam rice land to the South China Sea.

In Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland found himself faced with essentially the same geographic obstacles that confronted General Grant during the 1860s. The need to move combat elements into the 26,000 square miles of Mekong—long an ideal sanctuary and stronghold for the Viet Cong—prompted the forming of America's second MRF.

Borrowing from the tactical successes of the Mississippi Campaign and French experience with a Naval Assault Division during the Indo-China War, General Westmoreland modernized the concept of riverine warfare and requested the formation of such a force. The Joint Chiefs of Staff earmarked the 9th Infantry Division, then in training at Fort Riley, Kans., for Delta mission. Under the leadership of Brigadier General William B. Fulton (then Colonel Fulton), the Division's 2d Brigade was delegated to be the riverine element.

### FORMATION OF THE 2nd MRF

The River Assault Flotilla One, later to accompany the 2d Brigade into battle as part of the MRF, was commissioned on September 1, 1966, bringing to an end the century of American isolation from riverine warfare. At Coronado, Calif., the Navy, guided by Captain Wade C. Wells, started to assemble 100 vessels to house, carry, and support the 9th Division venture into the enemy's watery domain. Craft ranging from slow-moving World War II landing craft to giant barracks ships and sleek gunboats were molded into the fleet.

Two auxiliary barracks ships, the only two ships of their type in the U.S. Navy, were refurbished to provide housing for units of the 2d Brigade. In addition to their berthing facilities, the USS BENEWAH and USS COLLETON feature nautical design which permits them to operate in the shallow sedimentary rivers of the Delta. To provide facilities for two battalions of the Brigade plus supporting units, a non-self-propelled barracks ship was added to the fleet.



**Grenadier trudges through muddy Cam Son**

*CORONADO IX sweeps desolate swampland*

For troop and crew comfort, the floating barracks are fully air-conditioned, equipped with snack bars, movie areas, and recreation facilities.

Armored troop carriers, protected by armor plating and mounted with machine guns, cannons and grenade launchers, were obtained to provide transportation for the combat troops during missions from the floating bases to forward operational areas. Gunboats called "Monitors" and assault support patrol boats were attached to provide firepower and protection for anchored ships and for the slower

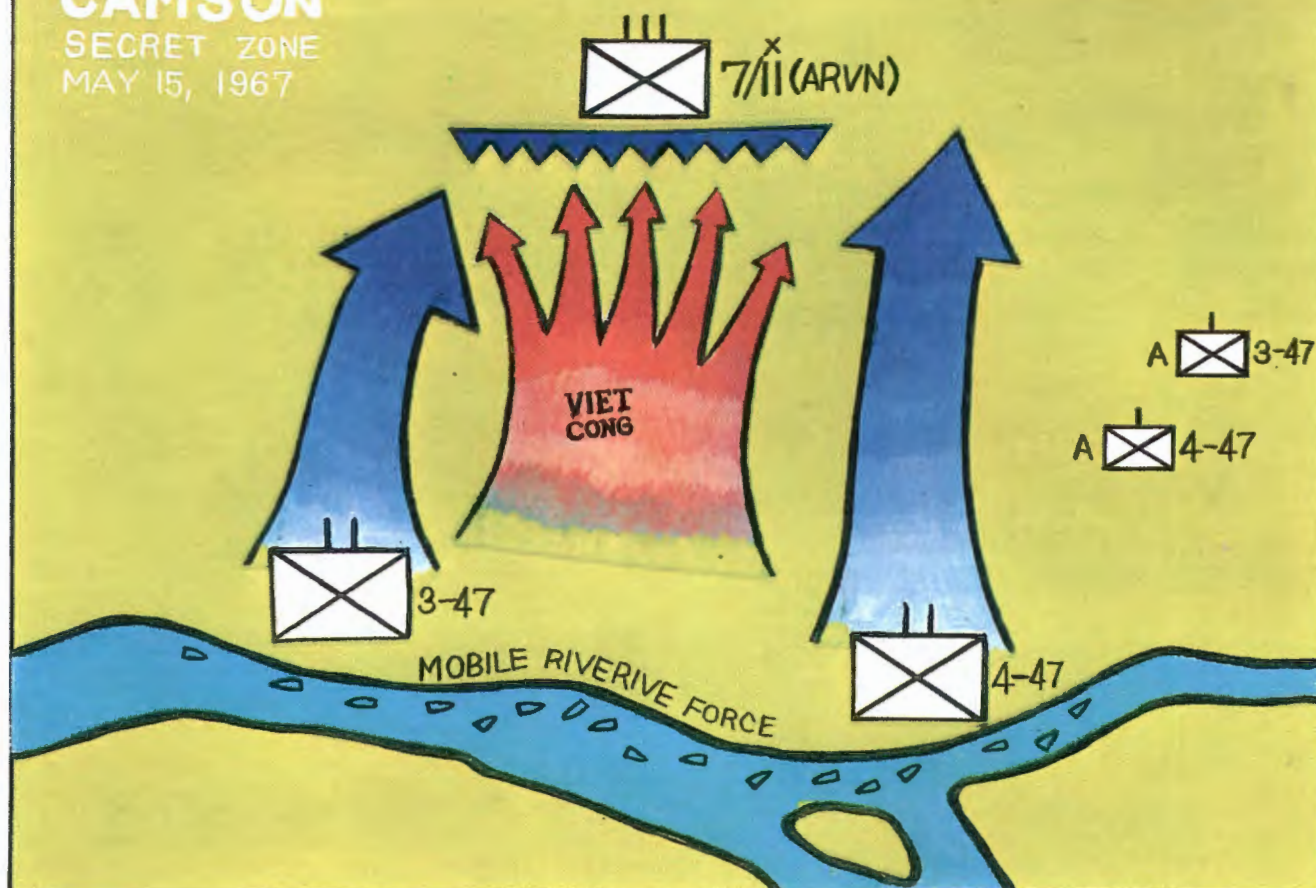
CORDI



## CAMSON

SECRET ZONE

MAY 15, 1967



First true riverine assault trapped the 514th Viet Cong Local Force Battalion in Cam Son Secret Zone on May 15. As the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry closed in from the east and west, Naval patrol boats blocked water escape routes to the south. During the encounter 113 Viet Cong were killed. No longer could the enemy believe that the Mekong Delta was his sanctuary.

troop carriers during assaults. The gunboats also serve as blocking and intercepting forces during riverine operations.

Other boats provide waterborne medical aid stations, complete with decks for landing helicopter-evacuated wounded soldiers. A landing craft, repair ship and various specialized supply and repair ships round out the vessels of NTF 117.

### EVOLUTION OF MRF AS COMBAT UNIT

Aside from top-level conferences between Brigadier General Fulton and Captain Wells, short briefings of top cadre at Ft. Riley on boat handling, and a 10-day staff school at Coronado; members of the 2d Brigade received no specialized training in riverine warfare. In fact, the vast majority of the brigade had no idea that the 2d Brigade had been selected as the riverine element of the 9th Division.

At the outset, the two leaders met to develop operational concepts and plans for the American offensive into the network of rivers, paddies and mangroves of the Delta. Merging of the two services into an effective fighting team required careful planning and organization.

The leaders agreed that combat in a riverine environment would be much like fighting a normal land encounter. Such warfare, they reasoned, was simply an extension of land fighting where the same ground tactics could be applied. The main difference would be in moving infantry units by boat instead of trucks or track-vehicles. Living on barracks ships would permit the force to move during the night thus ensuring that combat troops would be rested and fresh

when they reached the operational objective. Life aboard the vessels would also enable infantrymen to dry-out after being shriveled for days by wet boots and mud.

The waterways would serve as the transportation link—opening unsuspected routes of attack—for the infantrymen of the 2d Brigade. The Delta's water lifelines would lead American units to enemy strongholds hidden in nipa palm, mangrove, and jungle thickets along the rivers.

### OPERATIONS UNDERWAY

Combat units of the 2d Brigade arrived in Vietnam during early February. The land forces would begin operations and join their sister element four months later. With the sinking of a Navy minesweeper and an attack on two other ships in the Long Tau shipping channel leading to Saigon, the brigade was immediately ordered into the half land-half swamp area along the channel known as the Rung Sat Special Zone. Though not yet an active part of the MRF, Brigadier General Fulton and his men quickly adapted to operating in the mud and slime of the Rung Sat—a way of life that would accompany future Delta operations.

During the same period artillerymen of the 9th Division were experimenting with mobile firing bases acceptable to the riverine environment. Barges became floating gun positions and the 3d Battalion, 34th Artillery prepared to support MRF operations with their 105mm howitzers. The batteries would follow their infantry comrades along the rivers and provide fast and accurate support once their barges were secured snugly against the shore.

According to Brigadier General Fulton, the single greatest



innovation undertaken by the MRF was mounting 105mm artillery pieces and 4.2 inch mortars on the barges. The artillery section, including battery, six firing barges and 15 transportation boats, is commanded and furnished by the U.S. Army. With the availability of artillery support, the 2d Brigade was ready to go afloat and initiate Vietnam riverine operations.

## THE FIRST RIVERINE ASSAULT

The first large-scale riverine assault was delayed until May when the brigade shifted to the Dong Tam base camp—a 600-acre camp dredged from the My Tho River 40-miles southwest of Saigon. Dong Tam's location on the My Tho, a major arm of the lengthy Mekong, classified it as the likely location to house river operations.

In mid-May, Naval assault boats picked up infantry units and carried them into a Viet Cong dominated area 10 miles west of Dong Tam known as the Cam Son Secret Zone. This marked the first Allied drive into the Cam Son in two years. The Cam Son, later to be the battlefield for numerous clashes with the Viet Cong, proved to be the site of the first riverine encounter. The 9th Division troops tangled head on with the 514th Viet Cong Local Force Battalion and dealt them a stunning blow.

On a marshy battlefield the firepower of the 2d Brigade, supporting Naval craft and Allied units killed 113 enemy soldiers. On May 15, the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry loaded onto armored troop carriers and were taken to predetermined landing beaches along the Nam Than River. With naval assault boats blocking the waterways south of the land objective, the infantry units closed in from east and west.

The enemy was hemmed in on three sides with their only escape route, the north, blocked by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces. Air strikes and artillery fire, coupled with the air-mobile insertion of a reserve company into the area, forced the Viet Cong from their reinforced mud bunkers. Enemy defenses, oriented toward land routes of attacks and helicopter landing zones, had been foiled by the riverine assault. No longer could the enemy believe that the sanctuary of the Mekong Delta belonged to him.

## ENTIRE MRF BEGINS OPERATIONS

The entire Army-Navy force was assembled on June 1, at the Dong Tam base. The 2d Brigade Headquarters and two battalions, the same units that took part in the

Cam Son battle two weeks earlier, boarded the USS BENAWAH and COLLETON anchored in the My Tho River on June 2. With the entire MRF together and functioning, the CORONADO series of operations, named after the Navy's California training site, was underway. In the following months, battles erupting from riverine assaults during the CORONADO I through IX operations would account for over 1,300 enemy kills.

Major battles with entrenched enemy forces highlighted the riverine series during CORONADO I, II, and V. In these waterborne missions, 1,029 enemy fell victims to the MRF in Dinh Tuong, Long An, and Go Cong Provinces.

**CORONADO I**—The lowlands bordered by the Rach Nui Canal in eastern Long An Province became the scene of furious fighting following a June 19th river assault by the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry. Three days later, a sweep of the mirror-like rice paddies and tropical treelines by the MRF battalions, units of the Division's 3d Brigade, ARVN forces and other Allied units, counted 256 enemy dead. The riverine assault, coupled with blocking forces from the 3d Brigade, had caught the 5th Nha Be Battalion and dealt it a severe blow.

Other contact with the enemy during CORONADO I by MRF and supporting units inflicted 275 additional enemy deaths and disrupted Viet Cong activity in three Delta provinces. The MRF, teaming with air-mobile and land maneuvered units, proved its ability to strike at will against VC bases located in the Mekong lowland. Previously untouched enemy bases were struck and the VC driven from their defensive positions. Warfare in the Delta was being revolutionized by the MRF and the first CORONADO operation tallied 531 enemy kills during its 54 days.

**CORONADO II**—A renewed surge into the checkerboard rice paddies of the Cam Son during CORONADO II again netted an overwhelming victory for the MRF. The final three-days of July found the CORONADO forces in heavy contact with the 263d Viet Cong Main Force Battalion. Allied units, marched, drove, flew and sailed into the Cam Son, sealed off escape routes and trapped the unwary enemy in a hangman's noose. Before the noose was lifted, the mauled Viet Cong battalion suffered 285 dead and countless wounded by the rapid onslaught of Allied firepower and maneuverability.

As heavy contact was accomplished by tightening the noose, helicopter gunships circled the battle zone swooping down in support whenever the elusive 263d was pinpointed. Artillery from the floating barges of the 3d/34th pounded enemy positions and NTF 117 ferried troops from point to point along the network of canals and patrolled the

*Continued*

## Reliable Artillerymen prepare to fire from mobile barge

CORDI

*3d/34th provides fast, accurate support for infantrymen in the Delta*





KIRK



**Moblie Riverine Force moves into combat**  
*assaulting Viet Cong "sanctuary"*



**Infantryman crosses bamboo bridge**  
*going is rough in Cam son wasteland*

CORDI

KIRK



**Rung Sat Special Zone site of MRF operations**  
*ATCs shuttle Infantrymen into combat*

**Infantrymen struggle to cross a Delta stream**  
*in endless mud and water every step is a strain*

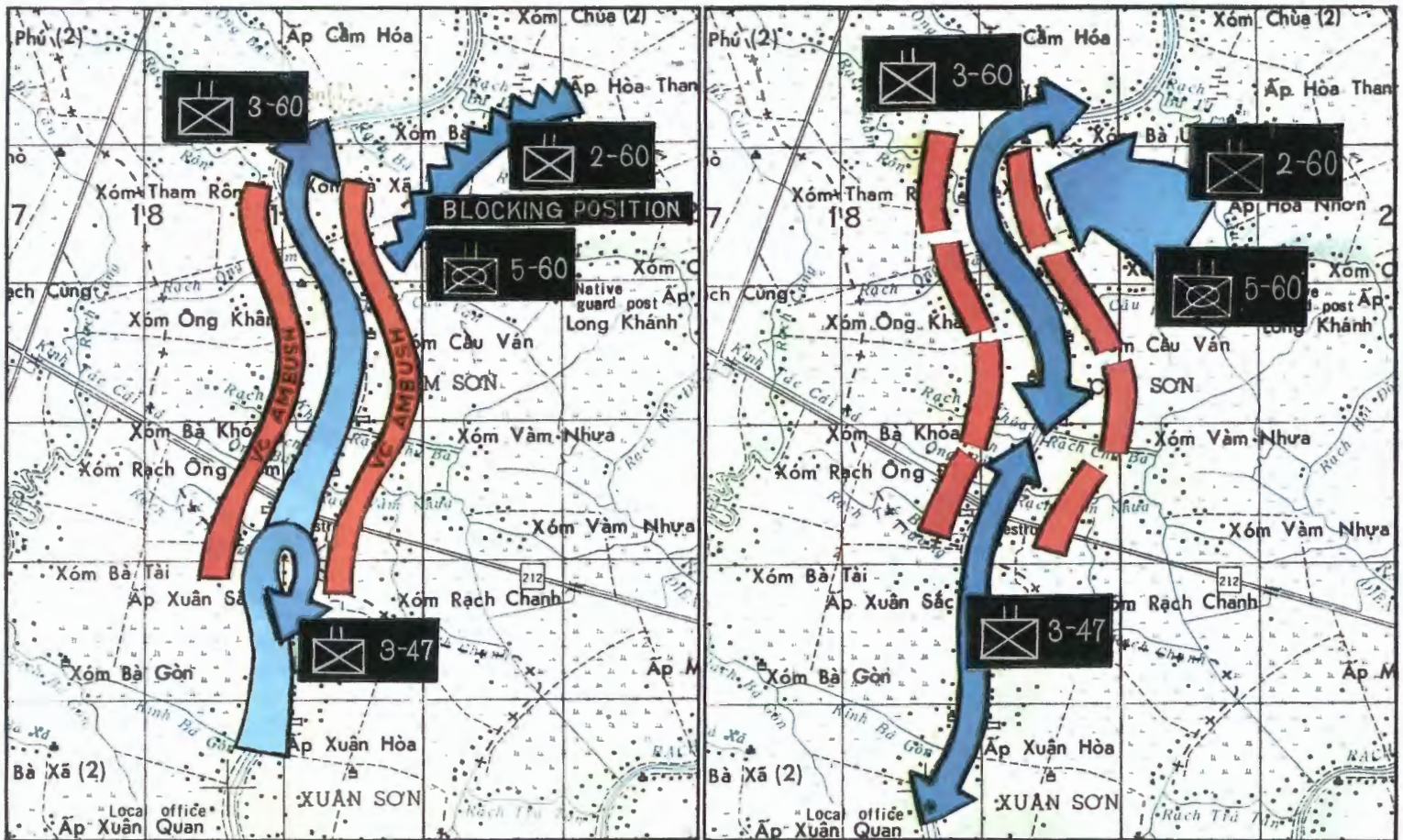
CORDI



**MRF includes floating fuel supply vessels**  
*OH-23 observation helicopter lands for fuel*

CORDI





The riverine force, two units of the 3d brigade, and ARVN soliders killed 213 enemy during a six day battle centered along the Ba Rai River in the Cam Son. Again the MRF tangled with and battered the 263d Viet Cong Main Force Battalion.



Church services aboard the USS BENEWAH

CORDI

*auxiliary barracks ship carries the flag of the MRF*

waterways to prevent the enemy from escaping.

With Air Force fighter-bombers constantly screaming in and dropping 500- and 750-pound bombs on Viet Cong fortifications, the enemy was forced to attempt desperate runs for freedom. In the predawn hours of July 31, the 263d made its final bid for freedom. Twice the enemy tried to ram their way through Vietnamese Marines working with the MRF. Both attempts were beaten back and the VC resorted to a familiar tactic—every man for himself.

CORONADO V—Soldiers of the 2d Brigade now directed by Colonel Bert A. David, saw the sharpest fighting of the 27-day Operation CORONADO V when they returned to the marshy Cam Son during mid-September. The riverine battalions, two units of the 3d Brigade, and ARVN soliders killed 213 enemy during a six-day battle centered along the Ba Rai River in the Cam Son. Again the MRF tangled with and battered the 263d Viet Cong Main Force Battalion.

MRF maneuver units transported by armored troop carriers, infantrymen of the 5th Mechanized Battalion, 60th Infantry, transported by armored personnel carriers, and additional fighting men lifted into the area by helicopters, snapped shut a chain link trap around the 263d Battalion on Sept. 13. The infantrymen along with 13,959 rounds of artillery fire, and 102 tons of Air Force bombs dropped





CORDI

9th Division Infantrymen move through waist deep water

*probing dense palm thickets searching out Viet Cong positions*

CORDI

during 47 close-combat support missions, accounted for 213 enemy kills. The enemy had been shattered again in the Cam Son.

The MRF returned to the tiny wedge of Mekong Delta marshland again during early October and tallied 94 additional kills. On the morning of October 6, helicopter gunships spotted a large bunker complex hidden in a jungle area of the Cam Son and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry moved into the area. A total of 47 enemy were killed during the day by ground troops, artillery fire and air support. A sweep of the marshy area on the following day accounted for another 47 kills as the enemy was forced from their bunkers.

### PRECEDENCE ESTABLISHED

One thing demonstrated quickly during the CORONADO operations was that by shifting anchorage and moving troops at night, intended assault areas could be kept secret from the enemy. By the time the enemy was alerted to the presence of the attacking river unit, air-mobile blocking forces or land stationed units had hemmed him in leaving no place to run.

The Army-Navy team continues to establish precedence and set goals for future riverine forces. By first-hand experience, the 2d Brigade has demonstrated that there is no need to have specially trained forces for this type of fighting. Any Army infantry battalion can board the Navy ships and perform in a riverine environment with no more than five hours of basic boat handling instruction. The MRF has proven this by rotating its three battalions between the floating base and Dong Tam. There was no demonstrative loss of effectiveness when the 3d/60th replaced the 4th/47th aboard the ships during mid-August.

The MRF, with its unique team of 4,500 Army and Navy fighting men, continues to forge its modern adaptations of historic riverine warfare into the Mekong Delta region. Despite fighting an evasive and native enemy, the kill ratio remains at more than 11 to 1 in favor of the American team.



Strung across sky, helicopters approach infantry

*choppers provide aerial fire support, airlift troops and ferry supplies*





9th Division officers display captured VC Colors OLSON  
*found in the sizable AKRON III cache*

STAAL



Gen Westmoreland, MACV Commander  
*inspects latest supplies unearthed*

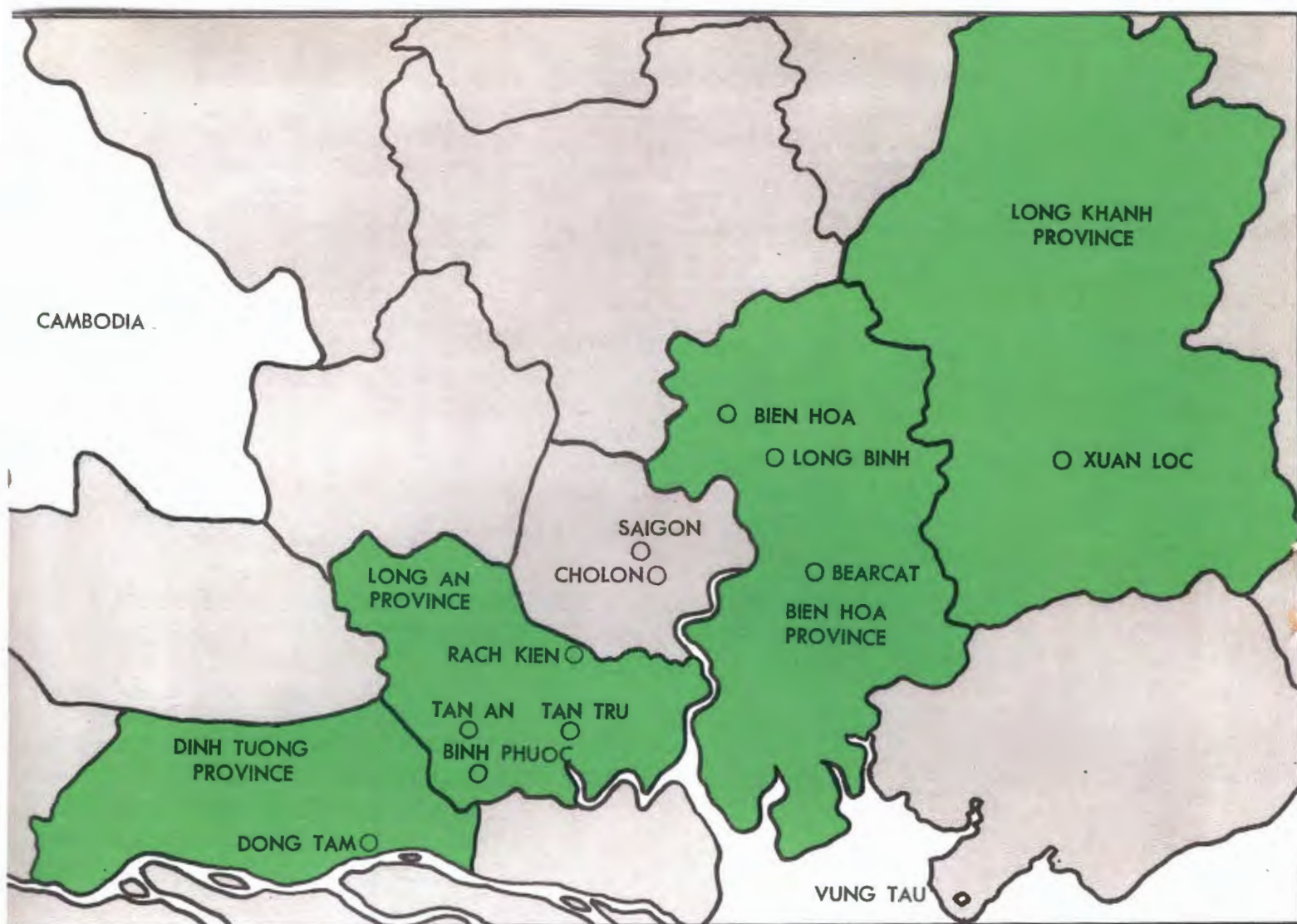


Giant anti-aircraft weapons seized OLSON  
*five 12.7mm machine guns were found in the tunnel complex*

Greasegun displayed on Communist Flag  
STAAL *weapons in the huge haul total 1,400*











**War in the watery Mekong Delta** BIPES  
*dry ground is a luxury for these soldiers*

with fire from helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers. A search of the battlefield by the infantrymen confirmed 181 Viet Cong killed.

During mid-May the Cam Son Secret Zone, an area 20 miles west of Dong Tam, was the target of a combined search and destroy mission. In this sweep, the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry, along with elements of the 7th Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division, and several naval river assault teams netted 113 enemy kills.

### A NEW COMMANDER

June 1 marked another milestone in the history of the 9th Division. On that day, Major General George G. O'Connor assumed command of the Old Reliables and Major General Eckhardt departed to become the deputy commander of II Field Force, Vietnam. General Eckhardt had commanded the Division for 15 months, from the first day of the new Division at Ft. Riley, through all the phases of training, deployment and initial combat success in Vietnam.

Under the direction of the new Division commander, operations in the lowlands of Long An Province, Dinh Tuong Province and the jungle area surrounding the Bearcat base camp continued.

### COMBAT—JUNE through OCTOBER

Months of Delta fighting had taught the 9th Division that in order to avoid being reduced to a limited role they must continue their efforts toward mobility. For the first time in 105 years, the U.S. Army and Navy teamed up to form a mobile waterborne fighting unit. Called the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF), the striking force is made up of two battalions from the 2d Brigade and Naval Task Force 117. Operating from a fleet of 100 naval vessels, the MRF conducts combat operations in the marshlands of the Mekong Delta formed by hundreds of waterways draining from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea.

Participating in action on another front, the Division's 1st Brigade, the 1st Australian Task Force, and two battalions of Vietnamese Marines launched the tri-nation Operation PADDINGTON in the jungles of Phuoc Tuy Province on July 10. The six-day sweep, designed to open previously Viet Cong-dominated jungle, resulted in 93 enemy killed.

*Continued*

### General William C. Westmoreland sites in a captured Russian sniper rifle

STAAL

*part of the largest arms cache ever seized on Vietnamese soil*







8 PCS

**Thailand's Queen's Cobra Regiment arrives**  
*Headquarters are set up at Bearcat*

Only 11 days later the Division was again challenged by the enemy. The action occurred when elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment were conducting a major jungle clearing operation along Highway 20 in Long Khanh Province. Suddenly struck by an attack from an estimated battalion of the 275th Viet Cong Regiment, the lead vehicle launched a counterattack that cut a swarth through the enemy force. The Viet Cong broke contact after an hour of fierce combat. Combing the battlefield after the engagement, cavalrymen confirmed 90 enemy dead and recovered 25 small arms and one 57mm recoilless rifle.

In early August, a joint American-Vietnamese force closed in on a suspected enemy stronghold in the Cam Son Secret Zone during the eight-day Operation CORONADO II. When the operation had ended, the Allies had killed 285 Viet Cong and captured 33 individual weapons. The action included infantrymen of the MRF, Naval Task Force 117 and Vietnamese rangers, marines and infantry units.

Encouraged by the success of CORONADO II, soldiers of the 2d Brigade, two battalions from the 3d Brigade, and ARVN units continued combat probes into the enemy stronghold during mid-September. Totals for the 27-day Operation CORONADO V included 330 enemy killed, 11 individual weapons captured, one crew-served weapon seized and 11,200 rounds of small arms ammunition taken from enemy supply caches.

On September 21, following months of planning and preparation by the 9th Division, the 2,200-man Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment landed in Vietnam to become the fifth free world force to assist the South Vietnamese government. The Thai unit, called the Queen's Cobra, then moved into a specially developed area at Bearcat and launched combat operations from the 9th

Division headquarters base camp.

The largest arms cache ever found on Vietnamese soil was uncovered by the 9th Division on October 8 during Operation AKRON III—a jungle clearing operation 13 miles southeast of Bearcat. A search of a massive system of bunkers and tunnels found in the area yielded 1,140 weapons, nearly 95,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 3,634 grenades and 452 mortar rounds. Included in the giant weapons total were four 75mm howitzers unearthed by the Division's 1st Brigade—this marked the first time artillery pieces had been seized from the Viet Cong by US forces.

## OTHER DIVISION ACTIVITIES

While combat operations were being conducted, extensive civic action and base camp development programs were being pursued by the 9th Division. Eleven days after the first increment landed at Vung Tau, the first Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) was conducted in the Bien Hoa Province hamlet of Tam Phuoc. Vietnamese citizens were treated by the medical teams for a variety of respiratory diseases, malaria, and tropical skin diseases.

By the beginning of December battalion and company level Civic Action teams, directed by the Division's Civil Affairs section, had treated 305,500 Vietnamese patients. Special projects such as commodity distributions, the rebuilding of schools, dispensaries and homes, and the repairing of roads and bridges received attention by the Division as it reached out to better the standard of living of the Vietnamese people.

## Machine gunner moves in tangled jungle

KALSEY

*adapting quickly to tropical conditions*

