

COMMANDER RIVER ASSAULT FLOTILLA ONE  
FPO SAN FRANCISCO 96601

1 September 1968

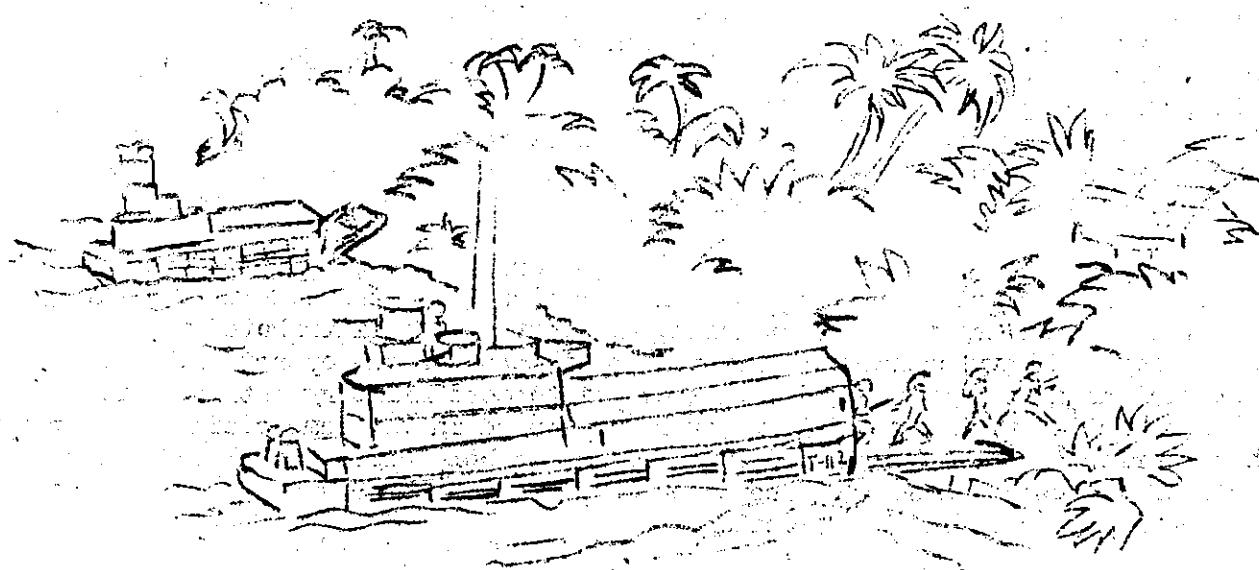
Dear Family and Friends of River Assault Flotilla ONE:

Several significant events have occurred since my last newsletter in June.

Many of the boats and most of the men from River Assault Squadrons Thirteen and Fifteen have now arrived in country. And by the time you receive this letter we expect that the last of our eleven ships will have joined the flotilla.

Due to the size of our expanded force, we have divided our ships and boats into two separate task groups which will normally operate independently of each other.

Mobile Riverine Group Alfa consists of River Assault Squadrons Nine and Eleven and seven ships - USS Benewah, USS Colleton, USS Nueces, USS Mercer, USS Askari, USS Sphinx, and an LST supplied by the Commander Seventh Fleet on a two to three month rotational basis. Three battalions of infantrymen from the 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, will be embarked in the ships and comprise the Army ground force elements of this task group. Captain R. W. Allen presently commands Task Group Alfa; however, he completes his year of duty in Vietnam in September and will be relieved by Captain Thomas F. Booker early in the month.



Mobile Riverine Group Bravo includes River Assault Squadrons Thirteen and Fifteen and four ships - USS Satyr, APL-26, APL-30, and another LST provided on a rotational basis by the Commander Seventh Fleet. Task Group Bravo will support Army elements of the 3rd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, which will live ashore at Dong Tam Base, about five miles west of the city of My Tho. Captain John G. Now commands Task Group Bravo.

The formation of the two separate task groups permits us more flexibility than we have had before. For a ten-day period in late July and early August the two groups were operating on the opposite extremities of the Delta, more than 100 miles apart. Task Group Bravo was conducting missions against Viet Cong elements in the area around Nha Be only a few miles south of Saigon. Meanwhile, Task Group Alfa was making the southernmost penetration of the war into the Delta when it launched ops in and around the U-Minh Forest which has been a Communist base area for at least a decade and perhaps for as long as 25 years.

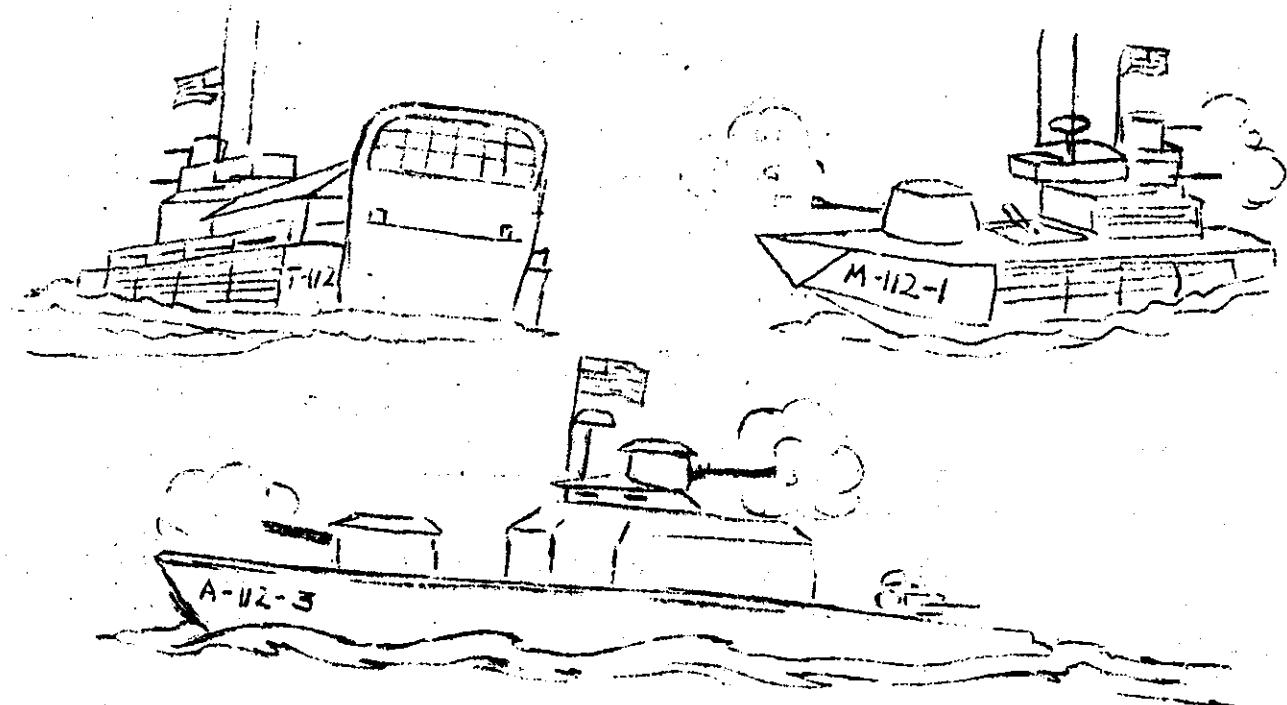
More than 250 Viet Cong soldiers were killed and huge weapons caches were captured in this operation south of Can Tho, making it a most successful endeavor. The boats, with their arsenal of heavy weapons, played a significant role as did the Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion which was operating with the Mobile Riverine Force for this nine-day period. I understand these operations received good play in the stateside press, so you may have read about them.

In response to several requests that I have received, I will now describe how a typical operation is planned and executed.

We select the area for each of our many operations on the basis of the latest intelligence information regarding current locations of enemy forces, in coordination with appropriate Army commands and Vietnamese authorities.

Our planners then go to work to draw up the details of the operation. Some of the things that they must consider are the number of friendly troops and assault craft required to do the job, how many boats of each type will be required, what waterways can and cannot be used due to depth, width or other factors such as vegetation growing in the water, and what the tidal situation is in the target area. The tides are very severe in this part of the world and have great bearing on our operations. Frequently, we must plan our transits so that we cross shallow areas at high tide or pass beneath low bridges at low tide. Once, down south of Can Tho, we even jacked up a bridge a few feet so that the boats could pass beneath. It is imperative that all such matters be carefully planned in advance, but we must be careful to ensure that the planners do not compromise the security of an operation by too much coordination or identifiable reconnaissance.

The Army and Navy staffs then go over the operation in complete detail to see if we can find any weaknesses or faults in our plans. At the conclusion of this meeting, the plans are typed on stencils, duplicated, and distributed to the various Army and Navy commanders who will participate in the operation. The operational area is also cleared with local Vietnamese military authority to avoid conflicting with any ops they may have planned in the same vicinity. Perhaps 12 hours prior to the beginning of the mission, we hold what we call a "back brief" for all of our own commanders. They then go back to their respective units and brief their personnel on the operation.



Many of our operations feature dawn or predawn landings. Thus the troops often board the boats for the transit to the operational area between midnight and four o'clock in the morning. Regardless of the early hour, we always have a hot breakfast ready for both the boat crewmen and the infantrymen before they go.

Three assault boats at a time come alongside the pontoons beside each barracks ship to embark the Army troops. Although we operate at darkenship conditions in the Delta, we do use a few red lights of low candlepower, covered on the sides and focused downward on the pontoons, to provide the small amount of visibility required for the infantrymen to assemble their packs and safely climb aboard the ATCs (Armored Troop Carriers).

Once the ATCs are loaded, the boats form into a column and begin the trip to the op area. Leading the formation are two to four ASPB (Assault Support Patrol Boat) minesweepers followed by a Monitor and then a group of ATCs. Other Monitors and flamethrowing ATCs are interspersed among the ATCs to protect the troop-laden convoy. The Squadron Commander controls the actions of his boats from aboard a CCB (Command and Communications Boat) which is usually near the middle of the column. The Army artillery barges, escorted by other Navy assault craft, will have left earlier so that they will be in place and ready to fire prior to the time the troop convoy begins moving into the dangerously narrow waterways near the operational area.

Enroute to the landing site many of the soldiers will be catching a few final hours of sleep. The first part of the journey will be along one of the larger rivers where the boat crewmen will be able to relax somewhat, although all gun mounts will be manned and ready for action should the column be attacked.

As the boats near their objective area and turn into one of the hundreds of small streams, everyone becomes more alert. Most areas of the Delta are heavily populated, and therefore, we do not open fire unless first fired upon. In some unpopulated VC-dominated regions where we have every reason to expect enemy ambushes, we may "recon by fire" while going through such areas. By firing at suspicious spots and bunkers with cannons and grenades, we can sometimes surprise the enemy into opening fire prematurely. At the least, it tends to spoil his aim.

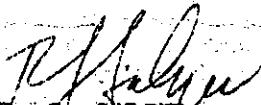
Finally we reach the area where the landing is to be made. We may have "softened" the beach for the ground assault with jet air strikes, with helicopter gunship ordnance, artillery fire, or by fire from the boats. We always stand ready to provide supporting fire to the troops prior to, during, and after the landing. The Monitors, CCBs and ASPBs continue to cruise in mid-stream with every weapon at the ready as the ATCs are beached to debark the troops. After the Army has gone ashore, the boats will frequently take up blocking stations to prevent escape of the Viet Cong by sampan.

The troops will normally stay ashore for two to three days, although we may move them by boat to many different locations during that period of time. By the end of three days, every sailor and soldier is ready to return to the ships for a warm shower, hot meal and clean bed.

As I have said numerous times before, I have never worked with a more dedicated, resourceful and professional group of men than we have in our force. They are doing the job they came here to do.

I am sorry that I don't have the time to send personal letters of appreciation to the many of you who have written to express their support of the task we are trying to achieve. In a country such as ours, no war should ever be described as a "popular" one, but I cannot understand or excuse those Americans who are lending moral support and encouragement to the Viet Cong to continue their terrorist acts against their own countrymen and their ambushes of our forces. It is good to be reminded that this noisy group is definitely in the minority.

Sincerely,

  
R. S. SALZER  
Captain, U.S. Navy

Commander, River Assault Flotilla ONE

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