

COMMANDER RIVER ASSAULT FLOTILLA ONE  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96601

March 12, 1969

Dear Families and Friends of River Assault Flotilla One,

First I would like to introduce myself to those of you who have been receiving newsletters from Captain Dale Schermerhorn. I'm Rear Admiral Bill Flanagan, and I relieved Captain Schermerhorn on 27 February, 1969.

Captain Schermerhorn wanted me to express his thanks for the many cards and letters received during the holiday season. It is most encouraging to know that we have your support in the job we are doing out here.

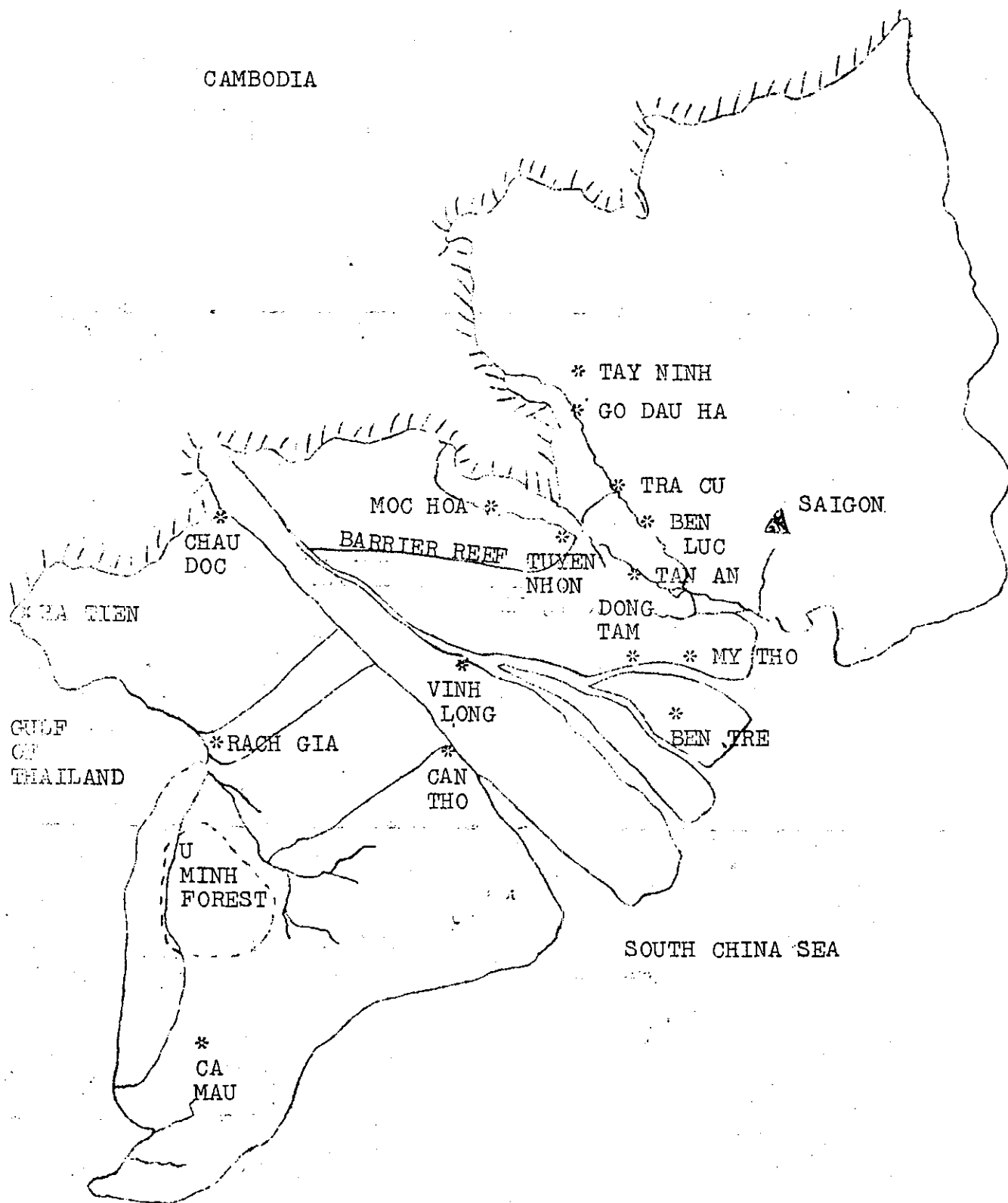
Now let me say "welcome" to all of you who have joined us recently as "Families and Friends" of River Assault Flotilla One. Since this is the first family newsletter to so many of you, perhaps a review of our operations would be of interest.

The Mekong Delta, home to River Assault Flotilla One, begins some 30 miles south of Saigon, and extends to the southern most coasts of Vietnam on the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. It is a low and extremely flat area covering about 26,000 square miles -- about a third of the total area of South Vietnam. And about a third of the country's people live here in the "ricebowl" of Southeast Asia." The Delta is criss-crossed by innumerable streams and canals, over 5,500 miles of inter-connecting waterways. You can easily see why the Mobile Riverine Force was a logical solution to the problem of moving troops around in such a battleground.

Daytime temperatures average in the 80's throughout the year, and the seasonal changes are marked more by rainfall than by temperature variation. From May through October there is seldom a day that does not bring showers, while the rest of the year is unusually dry. During the rainy season most of the land is either just above or just below the surface of the water. The entire region is ideal for rice growing.

The residents, who are mostly farmers and fishermen, live almost entirely off the land. They grow their own rice, which is the base of their diet, and supplement it with fruit and fish, both plentiful, and with pork and fowl. Coconuts, pineapples, and bananas grow abundantly along the banks of the streams and canals. The mud, sticks, and palm fronds which are used to build homes can be picked up almost anywhere. Since nearly all of their basic needs are easily contained, these people feel little need for contact outside their own district, and as a result they have not developed much interest in or loyalty to a centralized government.

Over the years the Mekong Delta -- with the exception of the cities -- has become a Viet Cong stronghold, partly due to the indifference on the part of the people to a national government, and partly due to the difficulty the national government has experienced in maintaining representatives in the muddy swamps and "paddylands." The national government of Vietnam has been quite successful in governing the cities and larger towns, but it takes special equipment to dislodge the Viet Cong from the outlying areas.



That is where the Mobile Riverine Force comes into the picture. It was designed and tasked to conduct assault operations throughout this low-lying area. Both Army and Navy personnel live aboard Navy ships which, along with Navy repair ships, make up what we call the Mobile Riverine Base. In a typical operation, the troops are transported by Armored Troop Carriers (ATCs) from the Mobile Riverine Base to a selected landing site, where they go ashore to seek out enemy locations. During the trip from the Base to the landing site, the troop boats are escorted by Monitors (we call them our "battleships") and Assault Support Patrol Boats (ASPBs). Also along will be a Command and Communications Boat (CCB) equipped with an Army-Navy command post. Thus both the Army battalion commander and the Navy squadron commander have an elaborate communications center from which to direct and coordinate the movements of their respective forces.

In addition to the four basic types of boats mentioned above, a number of the ATCs have been modified to meet the special needs of the Delta War. They have been equipped with helicopter landing pads, making them the Navy's smallest "aircraft carriers." These "mini-carriers" have proven invaluable for speedy evacuation of wounded personnel during combat, and resupplying boats that are on long operations away from their support ship.

Speaking of extended operations, I would like to tell you about a series of special operations some of our boats are supporting. In early November our Commander in Saigon, Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., announced a new scope of operations against the Viet Cong. Called "Operation Sea Lords," its overall purpose is to deny the enemy the use of Delta waterways to bring in his weapons, ammunition, and supplies. The operation brought together for the first time, boats of the Navy's three major operating forces in Vietnam -- our own River Assault Boats, the "Swift" boats which usually patrol the coastal waters, and the River Patrol Boats (PRBs) which keep check on river traffic, looking for Viet Cong trying to smuggle troops and supplies.

These operations range over the entire Delta, and sometimes keep our boats from their support ships for weeks at a time. Early in the campaign, one Command and Communications Boat set a record of 42 days away from its support ship.

One of the most successful campaigns of "Sea Lords" began on December 6 when a number of our boats, accompanied by PRBs, moved into a complex of narrow, meandering rivers within 15 miles of Saigon. Their purpose: to interdict enemy movement along these river approaches leading to South Vietnam's capital city. Called "Giant Slingshot," the campaign is centered on the Vam Co Dong River and the Vam Co Tay River, which snake westward from a point south of Saigon, resembling a giant "Y". So far, over 130 tons of enemy supplies, hidden along the river banks, have been captured. In recent weeks several stories have appeared about "Giant Slingshot" in major papers.

Another significant event which many of you may have seen on TV about the 2nd or 3rd of February was the turnover on 1 February of the boats of River Assault Division 91 to the Vietnamese Navy. The ceremony was held alongside the USS Benewah, and was covered by ABC, CBS, and NBC. These 25 boats will be operated by their Vietnamese crews in the Mekong Delta in the same areas where River Assault Flotilla One operates. This turnover was in keeping with our government's policy to gradually turn over more and more of our equipment to the Vietnamese Armed Forces. We expect to turn over more boats in the summer. For some men who have over nine months in country at the time their boats are turned over this will mean an early return to the States. Many, however, will be re-assigned to other jobs. Some will remain with the boats as advisors to the Vietnamese Navy.

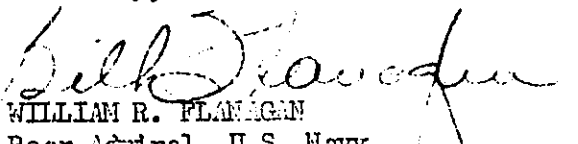
Awards ceremonies are held pretty frequently out here in the Delta, and it was my pleasure to present a number of awards soon after coming to the flotilla. Our deepest appreciation is extended to these men -- and all of the "brown water" sailors -- who daily risk their lives in suppressing Communist aggression in the Mekong Delta. The marked dedication and enthusiasm with which our fine Navymen are performing their difficult jobs brings credit to our Navy and our Nation. They are all men we can justly be extremely proud of.

There are some very disturbing reports from some of our men concerning crank phone calls to their families by persons claiming to represent the Navy. Usually the crank states that the Navymen has been seriously or fatally injured. Let me emphasize that is not the procedure any of the military services use to notify families concerning casualties. When one of our men is seriously or fatally injured, we notify the Chief of Naval Personnel in Washington. His office then arranges for a Navy official near the family to make a personal visit to the family. After the visit, the Navy official notifies the Chief of Naval Personnel that the initial contact with the family has been made, and then the Chief of Naval Personnel sends a telegram. The only individual who should ever contact a family is the Navy official who first notifies them, in person.

As the Mobile Riverine Force begins its third year of operations here in the Mekong Delta, the amount of knowledge we have gained in Riverine Warfare, the increased efficiency in firepower in our newer boats, combined with the consistently high caliber of men who operate them will ensure the most successful period yet in eliminating the threat of Communism from this area of South Vietnam.

It's a long and difficult task for all of the men here, but when it's done, we can all look back with a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that we have served our country well.

Sincerely,

  
WILLIAM R. FLANAGAN  
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy  
Commander River Assault Flotilla One