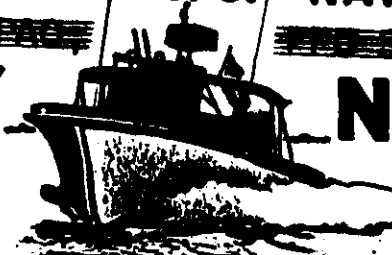


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JOINT NAVY EFFORT BOOSTS SAIGON DEFENSES

by RM3 Chan Cochran, USN

SAIGON - Patrol operations by the U. S. and Vietnamese Navies have begun in an effort to short-stop Viet Cong infiltration into Saigon.

The expanded patrols are part of a general reorganization of forces in the Capital Military District (CMD). The Navy involvement is aimed at exploiting the natural barriers provided by the Saigon River and its tributaries on the eastern and southern approaches to the city.

The Vietnamese and U. S. Navy units are conducting coordinated, around-the clock patrols of these waterways in support of the unified effort.

Participating elements are U. S. Navy river patrol boats (PBRs), Vietnamese Navy River Assault Groups (RAGs), Vietnamese Regional Force boat companies, and the Vietnamese Fleet Command. Vietnamese PBR crews now undergoing training and shakedown cruises are expected to join the patrols soon.

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The units involved in the new effort are nearly all Vietnamese and all have operated in this area before. What is new about their operation is that overall patrol plans have been set up under operational control of the GMD to cover the waterways 24-hours per day.

Also new is the involvement of U. S. Navy PBRs, which are patrolling the Dong Nai River, 10 miles east of Saigon, to prevent the Viet Cong from moving men and weapons **into** the capital city.

"The area of the river covered is sort of a funnel for bringing VC supplies into the Saigon area from the east," said Lieutenant Ralph Santi, officer-in-charge of River Section 551, the unit conducting the Dong Nai patrols.

"There are lots of canals that lead into the Dong Nai from the east," he explained, "which makes it easy for the VC to move supplies by water within shooting distance of Saigon.

"Right away, Charlie didn't like these patrols. We could tell," he said, "because even though we have been patrolling only about two weeks, most of the boats have been in more than one firefight with the VC.

"Most of the firefights are at night, of course," he added, "because the Viet Cong work better at night.

"When Charlie knows we are on the river," the Omaha, Nebr., native said, "he'll pop up green flares to warn other VC. When he does this, a strike may be made on his position."

The patrols run from the PBR base at Nha Be up the Dong Nai River, east of Saigon.

It was in this area that the Vietnamese Navy, on July 2, recovered a 250-pound enemy water mine. The mine had been placed there recently and was the first of its type to be found in South Vietnam in 17 months.

American-built PBRs, turned over to the Vietnamese Navy June 10, will begin patrolling the Dong Nai when their crews have completed their shakedown training.

Much of the daylight PBR patrols are spent checking junk traffic on the Dong Nai. To inspect a junk quickly, the PBR crews probe the cargo with metal-sensitive sounding rods, as well as checking the manifest, papers and ID cards of those aboard.

The fiberglass boats are driven by two water-jet nozzles powered by twin 220-horsepower diesel engines. They carry twin .50-caliber machine guns forward and one .50-caliber machine gun and one M-79 grenade launcher aft.

Two RAGs are operating closer to the city, on the Saigon River and the Kinh Te and Kinh Doi canals, where they set up mobile checkpoints along the rivers to inspect traffic moving toward the city.

In addition, the RAGs have landed or supported U. S. and Vietnamese troops for cordon and search operations south and southeast of Saigon.

The Regional Force boat companies, which patrol in LCVPs (landing craft vehicle, personnel), are operating in the Saigon River.

The patrols are conducted the same way as U. S. Navy Market Time and Game Warden patrols. River traffic is stopped and searched and the IDs of the occupants checked.

Elements of the Vietnamese Navy Fleet Command stand ready to bring in added firepower, if needed, in the Saigon River shipping channel between the Dong Nai and the port of Saigon.

These units all come under the operational control of the Capital Military District Assistance Command, located in Saigon. The U. S. Navy has assigned two officers to work as liaison between the predominantly Army CMD and the Navy units.