

## Operational Highlights - October 1968-December 1969

In the fall of 1968, certain changes in the employment of in-country naval assets seemed both possible and desirable. Hitherto, the basic pattern had been one of rather well-defined and separate operations of the three major task forces. Task Force 115, the Coastal Surveillance Force, conducted Market Time patrols and by all indications had succeeded in virtually sealing the coasts of South Vietnam from communist infiltration by sea. Task Force 116, the River Patrol Force, ran the Game Warden operation and enforced GVN established curfews and regulations. Finally, Task Force 117, the Mobile Riverine Force, conducted very successful search and destroy missions in support of the U.S. Army's 9th Infantry Division.

While units from the various task forces did occasionally combine for joint operations, what was envisaged in early October 1968 was a new task organization which would regularly employ assets from all three of the major task forces in pursuit of common operational objectives. These objectives were: (1) the interdiction of Viet Cong infiltration routes crossing the border from Cambodia into III and IV Corps; (2) the opening and pacification of certain vital trans-Delta inland waterways; and (3) the penetration of rivers in the enemy held Ca Mau Peninsula in preparation for the re-establishment of a GVN presence there.

In essence it was planned to create a "Brown Water Task Fleet" in which faster and lighter PCF's and PBR's would be used to complement the armor and firepower of heavier riverine craft in much the same way cruisers and destroyers complemented battleships in our Blue Water Fleets of the past. The armored troop carriers of the MRF would be utilized to transport and land the ground troops considered essential for support of naval operations on the narrow rivers and canals of South Vietnam.

Thus, joint employment of the task forces was the keystone in the concept of SEA LORDS (an acronym for Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River and Delta Strategy). The new task organization was given the designator TF 194 and assets were assigned from TF's 115, 116, and 117 on a more or less ad hoc basis for SEA LORDS operations. These assets were made available by a certain lessening in the density of Market Time PCF patrols (in part made possible by growing Vietnamese Navy participation in coastal patrols), which initially permitted the PCF's to relieve PBR's of some of their responsibilities on the lower rivers. The PBR's could then be pushed further up-river to assist in the establishment and manning of proposed interdiction barriers. The heavy riverine craft were already, beginning in late summer and fall of 1968, somewhat under-employed due to a chronic shortage of ground troops to support riverine operations.

In the first few months of SEA LORDS, four major barriers were erected to interdict communist infiltration across the border from Cambodia, stretching from the Gulf of Thailand to an area northeast of the "Parrot's Beak." The first of these was called Search Turn and it ran from Rach Gia on the Gulf to Long Xuyen on the Bassac River. The second, at first called Foul Deck and later, with growing participation by the Vietnamese Navy, Tran Hung Dao, was established on the Rach Giang Thanh-Vinh Te Canal, closely paralleling the Cambodian border from Ha Tien on the Gulf to Chau Doc on the Bassac. The third, and by far the most successful of the barriers in terms of enemy troops and material captured or destroyed, was called Giant Slingshot. This barrier was formed on two converging rivers which ran down either side of the Parrot's Beak to a confluence 15 miles south of Saigon. The fourth, Barrier Reef, joined Giant Slingshot in the east with the two-tiered western barriers, closing the ring on communist infiltration routes from the north.

The relocation of forces required for the barrier operations required the establishment of new logistic lines and, especially for Giant Slingshot, the creation of new, mobile support bases. The Advance Tactical Support Base (ATSB) was designed and deployed to meet this requirement. Built on 30' by 90' "ammi" pontoon barges which could be towed virtually anywhere on the rivers, the typical ATSB provided berthing and messing facilities for our boat crews, storage, a Tactical Operations Center, and various specialized equipment and machinery.

Almost from the very beginning the barriers reaped large returns in damage inflicted on the enemy. Through 8 December 1969, there were 1,417 firefights experienced on the four barriers, resulting in 2,788 confirmed enemy killed and 331 captured. There were 262 weapons and munitions caches uncovered, weighing a total of more than 159.8 tons. Other enemy caches were found on 23 occasions and the weight of the material they contained was 385.9 tons.

Statistics do not, however, tell the whole story. Because our boat crews are unable to leave their craft to search for enemy bodies after a firefight, the number of enemy KIA given above is unquestionably low. Further, we can never know what the enemy was deterred from sending across our interdiction barriers, for the naval presence there acted very much like a tariff in international trade. We do know, however, that the enemy has not been able to mount and sustain an offensive operation in III and IV Corps on anything remotely approaching the scale of the 1968 Tet offensive. It seems reasonable to suppose that naval interdiction has had a share in determining that circumstance.

The second major category of operations under SEA LORDS concerned pacification. In one sense, pacification was inherent in all

naval operations in South Vietnam as the ultimate goal of the entire war, but those which were concerned with pacification in the more restricted sense were those which aimed at opening waterways and securing areas for friendly use, in particular by establishment of a firm GVN presence. The Cho Gao and the Mang Thit-Nicolai canals were cleared of navigational obstructions, thus opening two vital cross-Delta water routes. The Cu Lao May-Tan Dinh and the Dung Island complexes in the Bassac River were sealed by naval blockade while Vietnamese ground forces conducted clearance sweeps. In June 1969 a new experiment in pacification operations in the Delta began with Operation Sea Float.

A floating complex of 9 ammo pontoon barges was moored in the middle of the Cua Lon River near the ruined and abandoned city of Old Nam Can in the heart of the Viet Cong dominated Ca Mau Peninsula. PCF's operating from Sea Float destroyed Viet Cong fortifications and drove communist "tax collectors" from the waterways. A concentrated psyops program attracted thousands of visitors to the floating base. Commerce, principally wood-cutting and fishing, dramatically revived. Within a few months more than 9,000 people were resettled in the area under the Navy aegis. An important economic district, "owned" by the communists for perhaps 20 years, had been restored to the GVN. In November Sea Float began to move ashore, as a construction program called Solid Anchor, to build a permanent PCF and Coastal Group base was initiated.

The unquestioned success of Sea Float led in late September to the establishment of a somewhat smaller but similar floating base further north in the Ca Mau on the Ong Doc River. This new operation was given the name Breezy Cove, and it too has been achieving the same beneficial results - re-generation of economic life, resettlement, an end to communist extortion of the people, a visible GVN presence. Operations such as Sea Float and Breezy Cove could well hold the key to the future of the entire lower portion of the Delta.

In June 1969 a disturbing increase in attacks on merchant shipping transiting the vital Long Tau channel to Saigon was experienced, as 19 such attacks were recorded. The Long Tau passes through the Rung Sat Special Zone (Forest of Assassins), the one land area in South Vietnam the defense of which is the responsibility of the Vietnamese Navy. This offered a unique opportunity for a coordinated, combined operation. Intelligence indicated that the enemy unit responsible for attacks on the Long Tau enjoyed a relatively secure base area just north of the Rung Sat AO, in the Nhon Trach District of Bien Hoa Province. Permission was secured to temporarily expand the Rung Sat AO into the Nhon Trach and U.S. Navy and Vietnamese Navy units subsequently supported Royal Thai Army Volunteers and elements of the First Australian Task Force in a series of

campaigns which struck hard at the enemy and his base area. The successful strategy of denying a safe refuge to the enemy, of continually keeping him on the move, and of never surrendering the initiative practically eliminated the threat to Long Tau shipping in succeeding months, one attack only being recorded in each of the months of July, August and September, and none since then.

Also commencing in June, vigorous PBR patrol operations in the upper Saigon River, later called Ready Deck, established frequent and heavy contact with the enemy. Earlier, in May, the first airlift of PBR's in the war occurred in this area when Skycrane helicopters transported 6 boats from the Vam Co Dong to the upper Saigon River in an operation which achieved tactical surprise.

In the north, in I Corps, Task Force Clearwater continued to fulfill its mission of coordinating and safeguarding logistics movements on the Perfume and Cua Viet Rivers. The most intensive mine warfare campaign of the war has been fought on the Cua Viet but the enemy has been thwarted in his attempts to close the river. A new operation, Sea Tiger, began in the Cua Dai area in April and was designed to provide continuous interdiction of enemy movement to and from Barrier Island in order to open the Hoi An/Cua Dai River complex to legitimate GVN use. Conducted by Market Time PCF's and VNN Coastal Force junks, Sea Tiger in its early stages achieved a firefight rate second only to Giant Slingshot and caused heavy damage to the enemy. Strong emphasis was placed on psyops and pacification was judged to be proceeding at a successful rate.

In all of the campaigns and operations thus far mentioned, measures were taken to ensure maximum participation by Vietnamese armed forces, particularly the Vietnamese Navy. It seemed clear in the fall of 1968 that Vietnamization of the war was going to be a national policy of the highest priority and every possible effort was made to speed and smooth this process insofar as naval forces were concerned. A program of accelerated turnover of naval assets to the Vietnamese (ACTOV) was initiated and in fiscal year 1969 alone the following craft were delivered to the VNN: 109 riverine craft, 24 PBR's, 20 PCF's, 2 WPB's, and 4 Utility Boats (100'). By mid-December 1969 the following in addition had been turned over: 1 LST, 1 LCU, 61 PBR's, 6 WPB's, 6 LCM-8's, and 13 PCF's. Further, plans were in hand for the turnover of virtually all in-country riverine and patrol craft by a target date of 30 June 1970.

Needless to say, these large additions to the Vietnamese Navy required a considerable and rapid growth in VNN manpower and training. At this writing the program is considered to be on schedule and progressing. The basic training techniques used to crew the boats being turned over are on-the-job training and classroom instruction in basic English and small boat operations. Vietnamese

sailors who have completed the classroom phase of their training are phased sequentially into the crews of U.S. boats where they receive intensive training by the counterparts whom they ultimately relieve. Normally the American engineman and boat captain are the last to be replaced.

It is, of course, not enough that the Vietnamese be trained to operate the assets being turned over. They must also be prepared to maintain and support them. Since much of the current support mission for U.S. Navy operating forces in Vietnam is provided by large afloat assets not planned for turnover, a considerable enlargement and restructuring of the VNN logistic system is necessary for the future support of VNN ships and craft. ACTOVLOG is the name given to the plan to develop an adequate logistic system. The timetable under which we are working calls for all bases and all support functions to be turned over by the end of fiscal year 1972.

The past 15 months have been extremely busy ones, but the rewards have been great. The Brown Water sailor has performed tirelessly and magnificently. A renewed confidence and fighting spirit have been awakened in the Vietnamese Navy. The naval war is by no means over, and there may yet be set backs ahead, but we have every good reason to believe that the initiative and the momentum are ours.