

Saigon

Rung Sat

Vung Tau

South China Sea

My Tho

Dong Tam

Cam Son

Vinh Long

So Dec

Con Tho

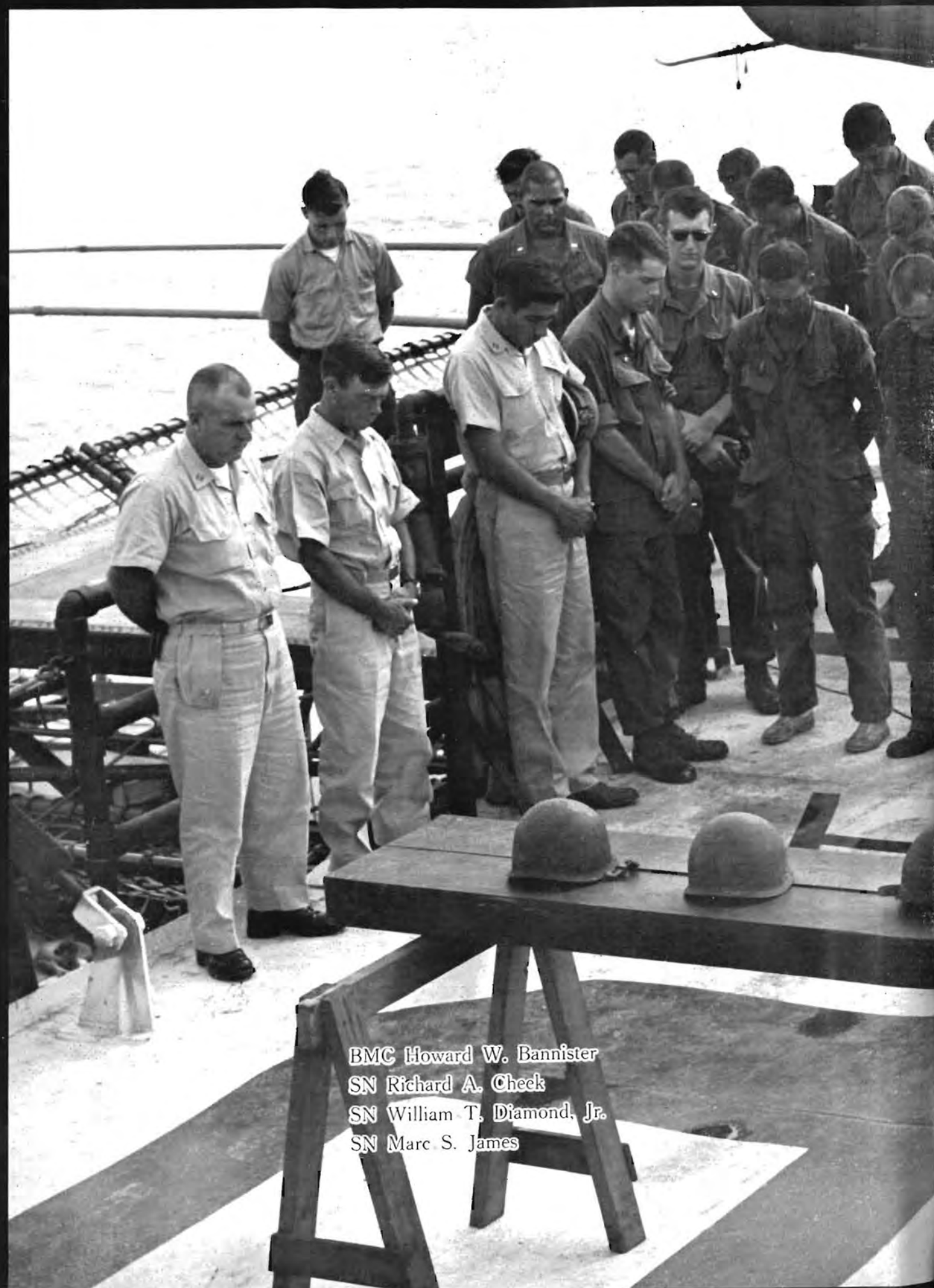
Mobile Riverine Force
operating areas



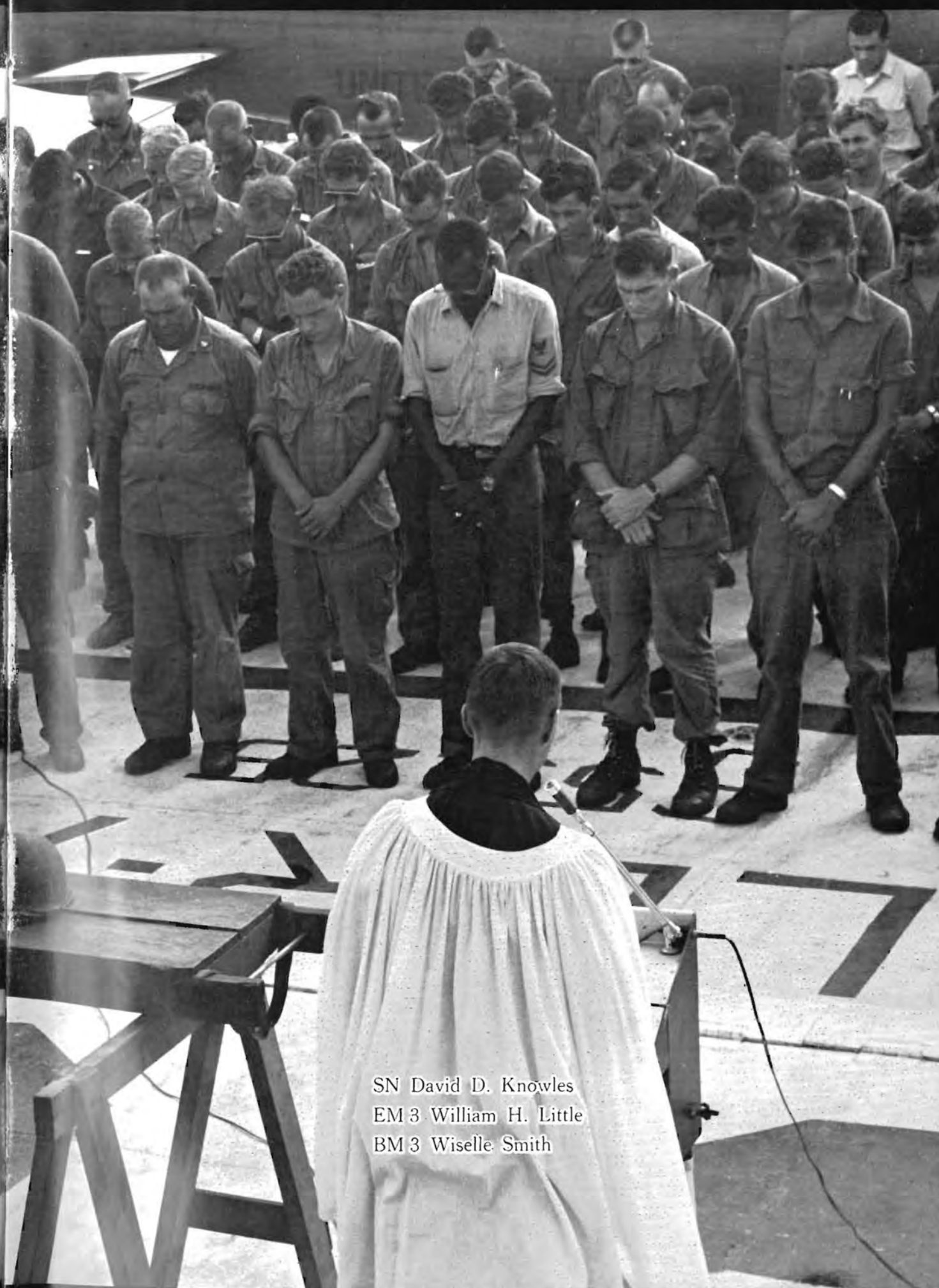
November, 1967

To these men who have made the greatest sacri

fice of them all, this book is humbly dedicated.



BMC Howard W. Bannister
SN Richard A. Check
SN William T. Diamond, Jr.
SN Marc S. James



SN David D. Knowles
EM 3 William H. Little
BM 3 Wiselle Smith



Captain Wade C. Wells
Commander River Assault Flotilla One

In World War II, I saw American fighting men of great valor and courage. I saw the same kind of men in Korea. Before coming to Vietnam I wondered if American men today would measure up to those I knew in our previous wars. In a word, you have. You are a new breed of U.S. fighting man, the combat sailor, who fights with guts and conviction in close combat against brutal life-snuffing weapons. I have seen few in my Naval career who have pursued and persevered the way you have. Your service is a monument to the freedom for which we fight.

It is about you and for you that this book is put together. Cherish what memory it brings for your actions have just written a most exciting chapter in modern military history.

God's speed to each and every one of you.

W.C. Wells

W.C. Wells
Commander Task Force 117
Riverine Assault Force

In the Beginning...



River Assault Flotilla ONE began officially on 1 September 1966. But the ideas that shaped the Flotilla were in use over one hundred years earlier.

The roots of RIVFLOT ONE were present when Union Navy gunboats joined Union Army troops in an advance up the Mississippi River during the Civil War.

The idea was again practiced in the 1950's when the French used Riverine Warfare in Vietnam during the Indochina War. The Vietnamese have carried on continuously since the French left Vietnam.

History played heavily on the minds of the U.S. planners when in 1966, they began to search for a way to win the war in the



Mekong Delta. Boats were essential as the French and Vietnamese had already proven. Yet boats alone could really do no more than what had already been done.

How to support the boats and the troops they were designed to carry became the number one research question. Should the U.S. develop a string of bases in the Delta

and work a few boats from each? Or should the Navy make one big floating base that could move anywhere on the major rivers in the Delta?

An afloat base was judged the most versatile and effective means of bringing a major fighting force into the Delta.



From these basic concepts civilian and military planners went to work honing broad ideals into a smoothly functioning force.

History figured again in the selection of what equipment would best fit the design specifications of the force. A pair of World War II barracks ships and 68 World War II landing craft got the call to service.

By June, the two barracks ships had been towed out of Atlantic mothballs to the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard for major conversion. These two ships were to be the heart of an afloat base.

Supply people throughout the Navy hunted

to find 68 LCM-6 boats. Logisticians figured out how to get them to the half-dozen shipyards that were contracted for the conversion program.

The race was on. Could the Navy get a riverine fleet on station and ready by early 1967? The Army had said that they would be waiting for us.

At this time most of us didn't know anything about this force. In fact it was not until late summer or early fall that we started hearing about River Assault Flotilla ONE.

Nobody we asked really knew much, but a lot of people had the normal trumped ideas. Some probably thought or were told, "Oh, that's those PBR's, working on the rivers." In any case, it was duty in Vietnam. But during September and October, word of RIVFLOT ONE went round the world, not by the press but by Navy message saying RPT NLT NAVPHIBBAS, CORONADO, CALIF FORDU WITH RIVFLOT ONE/RIVSU-PPRONSEVEN...OUTUS 1 YEAR OR MORE. And we went there eagerly, as much to find out what this thing was all about as to

report for duty.

Meanwhile around the country, shipyards were banging away with airhammers and planners were grinding pencils shaping the new flotilla. An old repair ship, USS ASKARI, a veteran of Vietnam in 1954 was being demothballed for her second go—this time with the Riverine Force. Philadelphia was dry-dock deep in problems on the BENEWAH AND COLLETON. Washington was struggling to find and then position new equipment required by the force.



Shipyards from Key West, Florida to Seattle, Washington labored on changing the classic LCM-6 into something their original designers never would have believed.

But the thunder struck loudest in Coronado, California where building 154 sweated vicariously with the Riverine Staff inside. Here were kept the score sheets, projection charts, delivery dates, availability figures and the reams of details that went into starting a new force. Phone calls, messages, Saturdays, Sundays, nights, holidays.

In Saigon, a tiny office in the NAVFORV Headquarters worked with a disproportionate amount of interested people. RIVFLOT ONE's advance detachment wrestled with the never-ending field problems that the force could expect to encounter.

At Vallejo, California, there was excitement, too. A training command, called Naval Inshore Operations Training Center (NIOTC), prepared to teach its first class of Riverine Assault people. Curricula were established, changed, smoothed and changed again.

Starting during the fall of 1966, each of us got our first true taste of riverine warfare at the center in Mare Island. Despite how indefinite much of the early instruction was, the basic training was absolutely essential. Swimming, first aid, day and night navigation,



and those endless hours in the rivers and sloughs around Vallejo gave us the start that we needed.

SERE training. Well, each of us has our own version of Warner Springs, California or Whidbey Island, Washington.



AIR TERMINAL

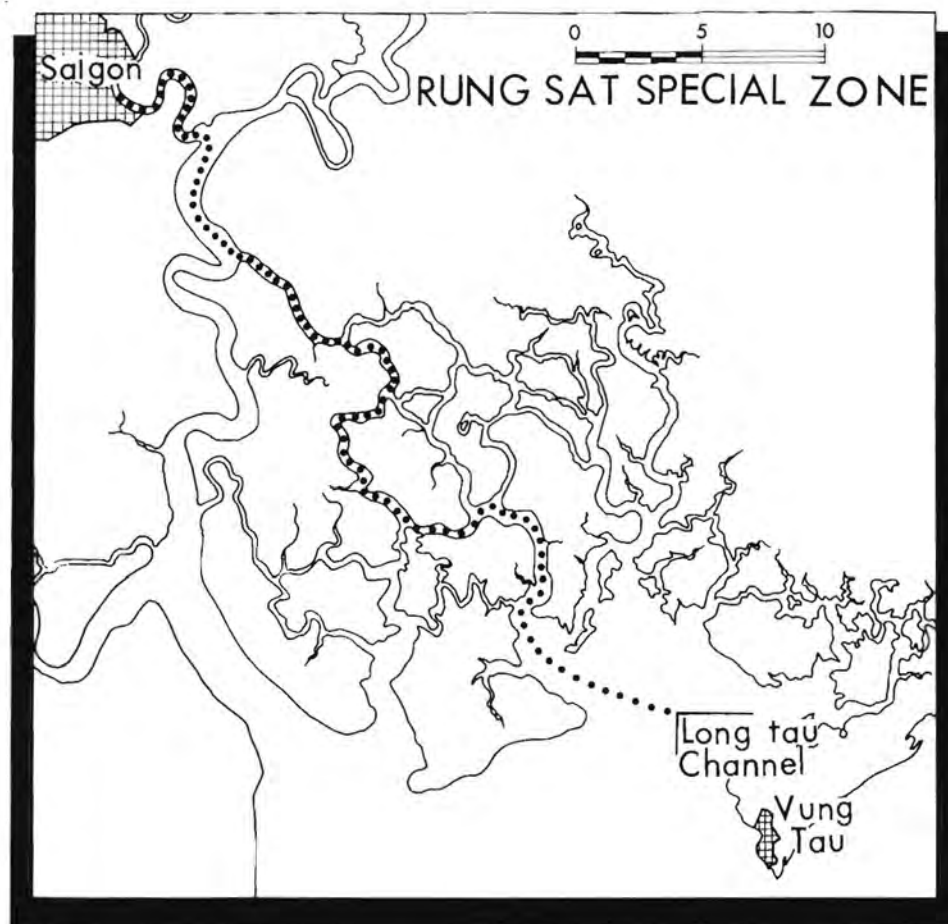


Before 1967 was out of the delivery room RAS 9 Staff and RAD 91 were on their way to Viet Nam where through trial and error they set the pace and pattern for all of our current operations. While some trained on Hogbacks with the WHITFIELD COUNTY and real army troops, others were divided among the Vietnamese RAGS in the Mekong Delta, Can

Tho, My Tho, and Nha Be. But the real focus was still back in the United States.

BENEWAH and COLLETON were nearing completion, ASKARI was underway for Vietnam, and APL-26 was also enroute. Boat conversions were agonizingly slow. Plans were developing rapidly and the Army was ready.



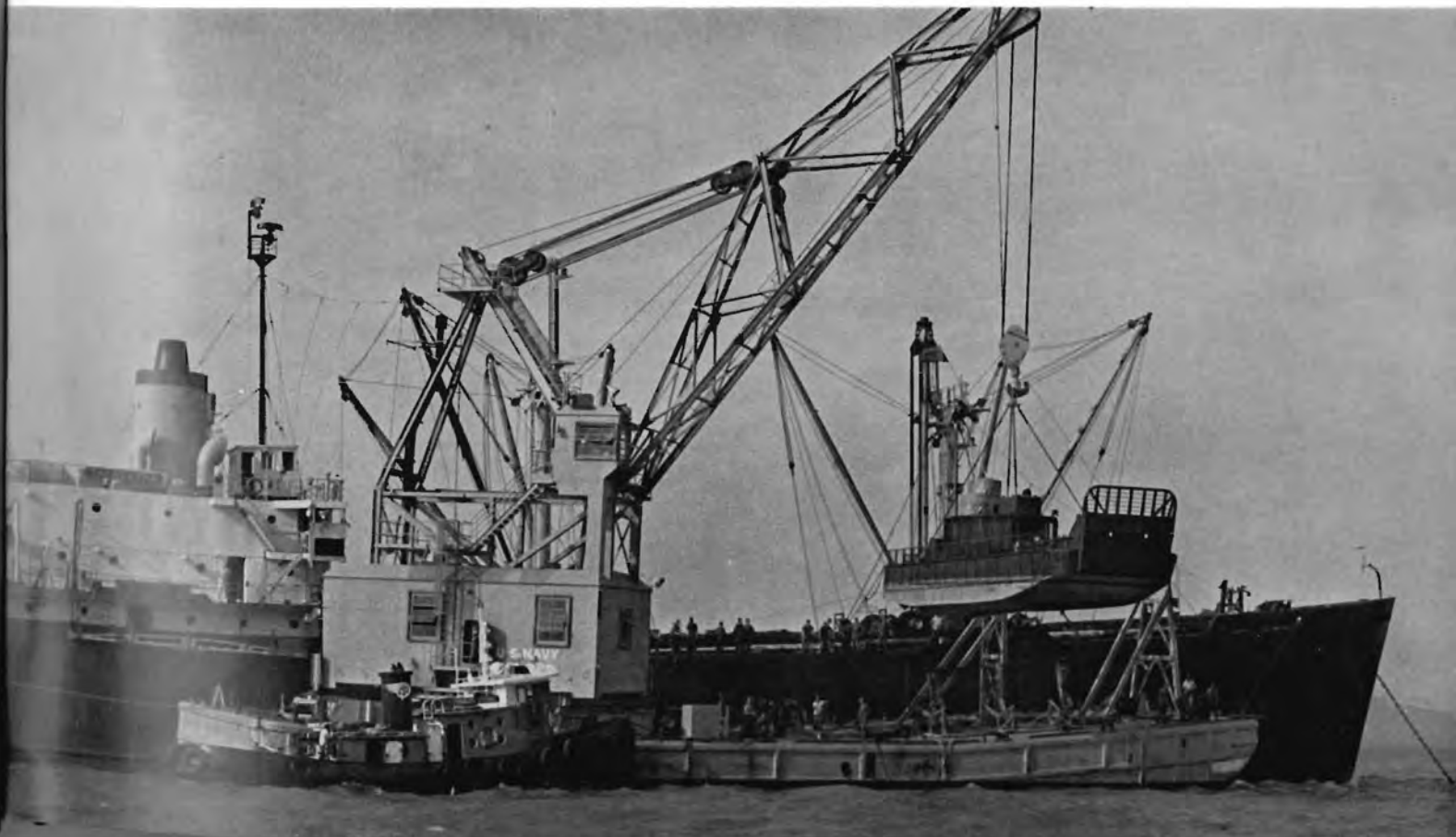


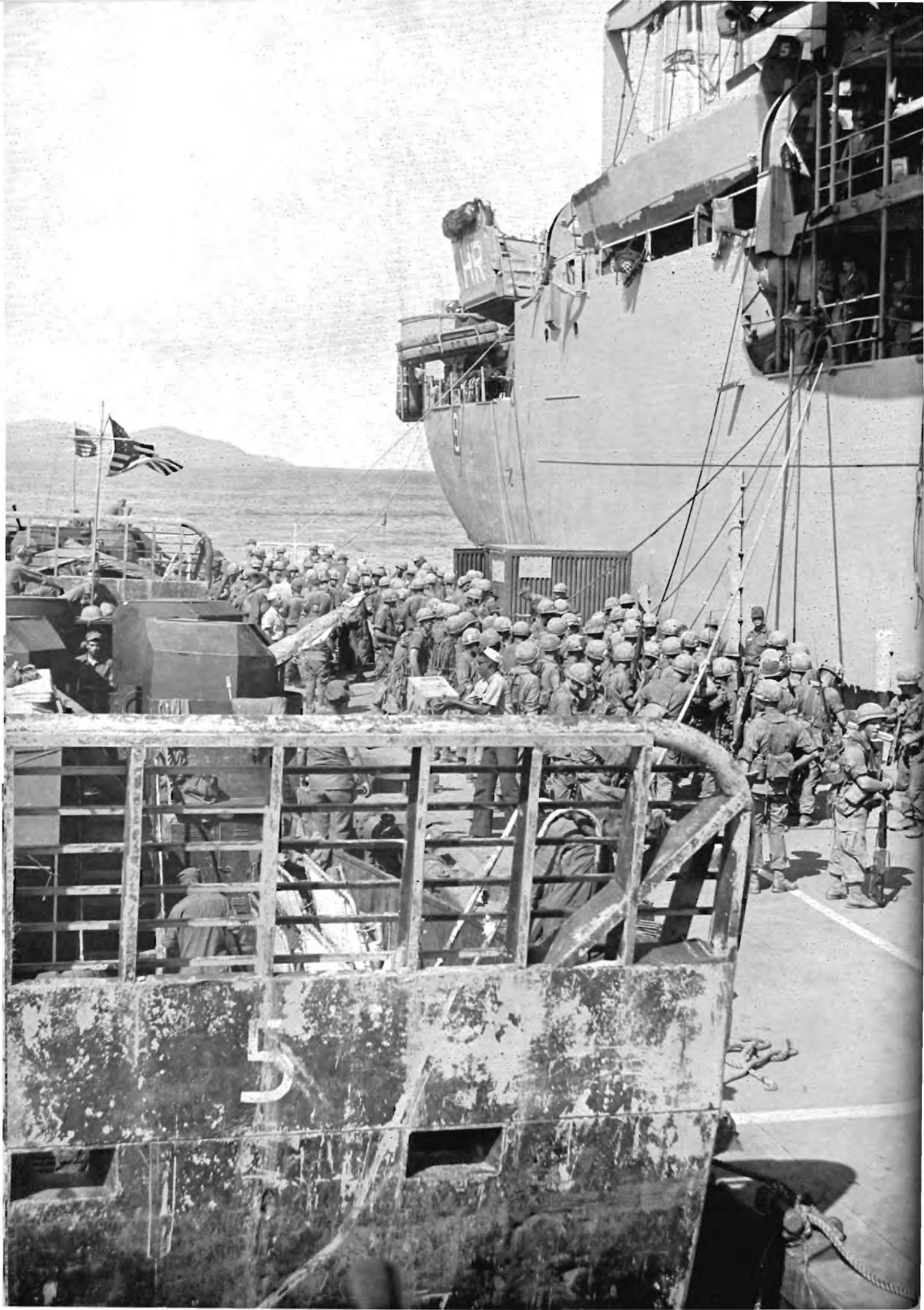
When three mine-sweeps were badly damaged on the Long Tau shipping channel to Saigon on the 15th of February, River Assault Flotilla ONE received orders to stop training and start operating. The next day we made our first assault in the Rung Sat Special Zone which surrounds the channel. Eight days later, the main portion of the staff and RAD 92 arrived in-country. River Assault Flotilla ONE had left its permanent home of Coronado, California for a not so temporary stay in Vietnam.

The pace continued as we got ready for the boats. Finally they came, a bit behind schedule, but they came.

A 1966 idea was finally becoming a 1967 reality.

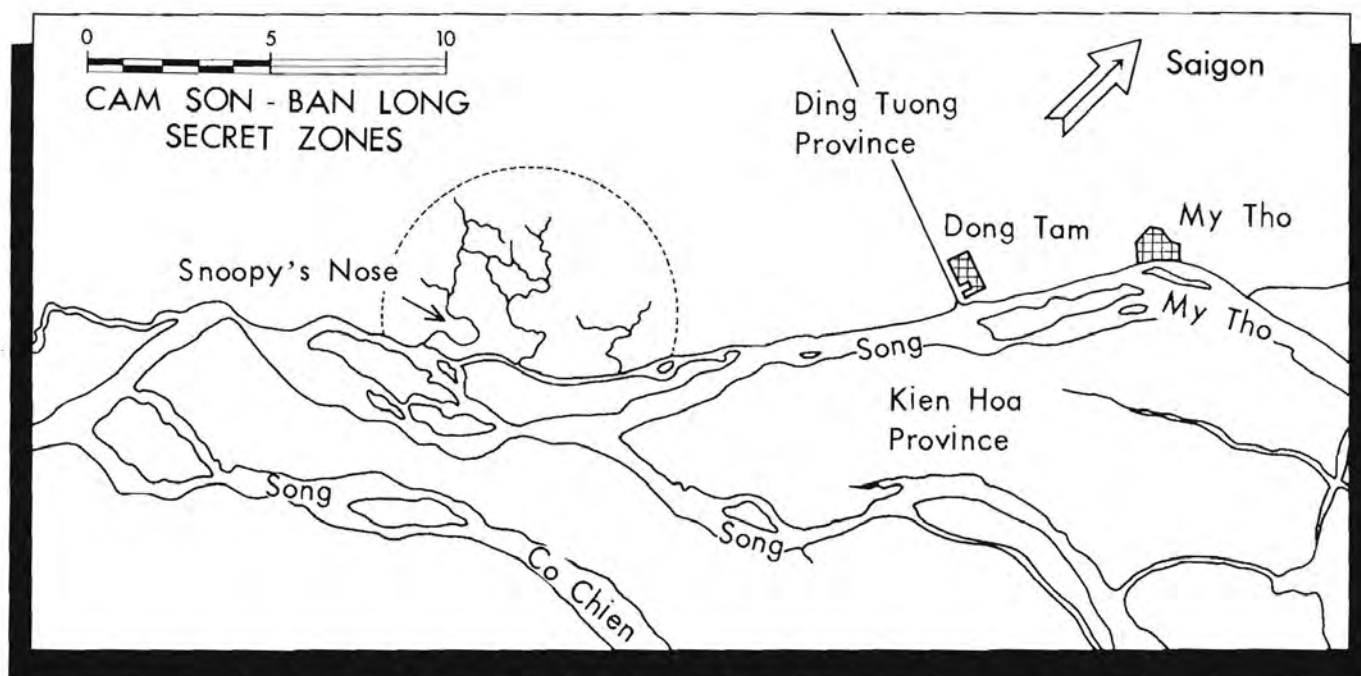
Twenty one days and a coat of green paint later, ASKARI was outfitting her first ATC. HENRICO (APA-45) which had already had its WESTPAC cruise was extended again to house the growing force, and the WHITFIELD COUNTY was on her way back to Japan.





RAS 11 and RAD 111 finished their training and headed for the real thing in late March. They were plying the Rung Sat within a few days. No significant enemy incidents occurred along the Long Tau during our operations in the area. Then we all packed our gear and moved to the MONTROSE to await the arrival of the BENEWAH 22 February. Excitement increased as the BENEWAH's arrival came closer. Two months exactly from her 22 February Little Creek departure, RIVFLOTONE's ugly green flagship pushed over the horizon into Vung Tau Harbor.





COLLETON joined the growing force in early May, and about the same time the APL and RAS 9 moved to Dong Tam. On the 15th, RAS 9 made the first major contact with the enemy in the Cam Son Secret Zone. Battle testing proved the boats to be even more substantial and effective than antic-

ipated. It was good to see that the designers knew what they were doing.

The MRB moved to Dong Tam on the 1st of June. The next day marked the birth of the MRF when the full complement of Army personnel came aboard.



Later the base moved to Nha Be and then further down the Soi Rap River. On 19 June, the MRF locked horns with the Viet Cong again in what turned out to be the first of several battles in Long An and Go Cong Provinces.

After another Rung Sat operation from that Oriental Riviera, Vung Tau, followed by more Go Cong and Long An drives, the now smoothly functioning strike force went back to Dong Tam to hunt the enemy in their Delta sanctuaries.



The penetrations even took us to the village where the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) movement was announced to the world in 1954.

In late September the first of the long awaited ASPB's arrived in-country. Low in

the water, mean looking, they added no beauty to the Navy's Newest Task Force.

Over the months the army has grown to like the Navy way of life and a new type of Navyman—the combat sailor—has begun to make his place in history.



A Typical Operation



No two riverine operations have been the same. Yet, over the first and crucial year, a pattern has developed, a pattern that has lent itself to as many variations as there have been operations, but nonetheless, a pattern.

The pattern actually begins the day before an operation when the boat crews load their boats with C-rations, water, fuel and ammunition and check over their boats from top-to-bottom looking for and fixing things that could give them trouble tomorrow.





That evening the boat captains gather with the Division Commander for a briefing. The Squadron Commodore is sometimes there, sometimes not. Water movement plans are passed out, checkpoints, shackle codes and intelligence reports are noted. The order of loading and steaming are put out and the smokey circles disassemble.

Groping their way across the unlighted pontoons the boat captains make their way back to their boats to pass the word to their

crews. Then the checklists are checked and rechecked, the night watch is set and the rest of the crew grabs a couple hours sleep.

Early in the morning, sometimes awfully early in the morning, the exact time is determined by the distance to the landing zone, all the boats clear the pontoon and form up into a circle. The embarkation detail is set. Three troop carriers return to pickup a company of soldiers.





An ATC stands ready to move in if one of the other boats has any trouble. When the company is aboard, the boats cast off and rejoin the circle. The procedure is repeated until all the troops are in the boats. Then the Monitors and CCB's come alongside to pick up the command personnel.

On signal, two boats assigned as minesweep-

ers head out into the night and the circling boats pull off into a long, silent, fearsome column behind them.

The troops waste little time in draping themselves over the steel decks, ammo boxes and each other to read or sleep their way to the point where the boats turn off the rivers to head down the smaller streams.



BASTARDS' OF LAST-DITCH HILL

Death-battle during 72,000 assault-charges. Chinese charged the First Battalion's holding gun turret. But instead of a jaw-
candy walkover, Mac's "unbreakable veterans" ran into
more hell than the world had ever seen since D-Day.

Here the sweeps are ordered to stream their gear. General Quarters is signalled and the boat crews take refuge in their flak jackets, steel pots and gun mounts.

As the boats move into the small stream, a chopper overhead surveys the situation. Sometimes the boats fire into the banks of the stream to make the enemy keep his head down, sometimes they let the Air Force bomb the landing zones. Other times Army artillery pounds the area. Not infrequently, a combination is used.





Shortly after dawn the boats reach their landing zones where on signal they turn in groups and run their bows up on the stream banks. The safety hooks come off and the bow ramps go down. The troops move out. It may be into mangrove swamps, rice paddies or nipa palm thickets, but the troops know that no matter what the cover, the same miserable Mekong Delta mud will be under it.





The boats back off and establish blocking patrols around the area where the troops are operating. Some boats beach to watch and wait. Sampans are searched, men without proper identification papers are detained for questioning by Vietnamese officials and war supplies are confiscated. Day and night, around the clock, the boats may go back and forth on their assigned stations. If it is quiet, boredom sometimes settles in. Sometimes it's not quiet. Some boats are called in to pick up troops and move them to another location or to resupply the troops.

Others may be called upon to suppress an enemy firing position.



Some of the boats were assigned special missions before leaving the MRB. The medical aid station which carries doctors, medics, medical supplies and a built-on helo pad for medivacs stands by to go upstream for casualties. Another boat with a helo pad is ready to refuel helicopters if necessary. Still other ATC's carry Marines who are gathering information on water depths, currents and tides in the uncharted streams. Somewhere on yet another ATC is an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Team prepared to blow up anything that might impede our progress or help the enemy.

After two or three days when the troops have finished their sweep of the area, or when the battle is over if they made contact with the enemy, the boats close in to pick them up.









At the sight of the identifying smoke grenade the boats move in to the banks, lower the ramp again, and the wet, muddy, tired troops move out of the bushes and rivers and back on the boat.

The trip back to the MRB is almost a reverse of the trip out to the field but the men are talking a lot more now. They are

telling war stories that grow in dimension as they are retold throughout the boat. They are talking about their wives, girl friends and cars. It's mostly happy talk because they are happy to be alive and happy to be going back to the safety and comfort of the MRB.



Tomorrow or the next day the boat crews will check out their boat, load them with C-rations, water, fuel and ammunition;

the boat captains will attend the evening briefing.....

