

effort to 'pacify' the region and drive out the remnants of the NVA and VC forces. However, on the Cua Viet River, the NVA launched a renewed effort to close the waterway to allied traffic. Marines tried to secure the shoreline against these attacks but the elusive guerrillas still managed to continue the attacks. This kept the Dong Ha unit on the defensive, and as NVA efforts increased, more minesweeping vessels had to be assigned to augment the LCM-6s. These new additions included three 57 foot fast MSBs from Minedivision 113 which were much better equipped to handle the mine threat on the Cua Viet than the converted landing craft. With these additional boats, the situation was gradually turned and by mid-1969 attacks along the Cua Viet River had been successfully contained. However, constant patrolling was still continued since the rivers proximity to the DMZ and Laos gave the communists the opportunity to quickly stage attacks if they felt allied forces were becoming lax.

Minesweepers

Early in the war the *Viet Cong* carried out a number of attacks against both military and commercial vessels using a variety of explosives and mines. A US escort carrier, being used as an aircraft transport, was sunk at the Saigon dock by charges placed on her hull by VC sappers. On the river leading to Saigon a number of cargo ships were damaged by mines detonated from the shore, while on the smaller canals and streams the Vietnamese Navy lost several junks and RAG boats to similar devices. Following the carrier incident, increased harbor surveillance cut down on attacks of this nature but throughout the war enemy swimmers remained a threat, not only to moored ships, but also to shore and river facilities*.

To counter the enemy's mining effort on the main rivers, the US sent four 57 foot wooden hulled minesweepers (MSBs) to Vietnam in early 1966. These boats of Mine Squadron 11 were designated Detachment Alfa and arrived on the Long Tau river in March of 1967. Assigned to Game Warden forces, Detachment Alpha operated under Task Group 116.4 with its headquarters in Saigon. Working alongside of Vietnamese units the American crews swept the Long Tau daily to keep it clear of enemy mines. Normally, the Vietnamese were responsible for the area from Saigon south to Nha Be while the US detachment covered the stretch of the Long Tau from Nha Be to the South China Sea.

Both the Americans and *Viet Cong* realized quite early that these minesweepers were extremely important if the lifeline to Saigon was to be kept open. The US Navy responded by doubling the number of MSBs deployed on the Long Tau within a year of the arrival of Detachment Alfa. For their part the communists increased the frequency of attacks against the lightly armed MSBs. 15 February 1967 was a particularly bad day for the minesweepers. Using mines, rockets, recoilless rifles, and automatic weapons the VC sank one minesweeper (MSB-45), severely damaged another (MSB-49), and hit two others; two sailors were killed and sixteen were wounded, but despite these the unit was sweeping the river the next day. The

*During the 1968 Tet offensive, VC sappers, using scuba gear purchased at a local PX, blew up a major bridge in Hue.

ferocity of these attacks showed just how much the minesweepers were hurting the VC's effort. To counter these attacks, increased PBR and helicopter support was provided while the newly constituted Mobile Riverine Force conducted a series of sweeps along the Long Tau to root out the guerrilla units.

The communists also tried mining the Cua Viet and Perfume rivers in I Corps, and being only a short distance from North Vietnam, it was much easier for the enemy to transport mines to these rivers. Requests from the Marines in late 1967 prompted the Navy to assign five LCM-6s converted to minesweepers for use on the Perfume River in conjunction with a detachment of PBRs. Coverage for the Cua Viet River was provided by a riverine division, minus its ASPBs, whose ATCs had been fitted with minesweeping gear. In mid-1968 these minesweeping ATCs were replaced by five converted LCM-6s which were better equipped for minesweeping duty. Eventually, the Cua Viet force was supplemented by three MSBs from Da Nang harbor, whose main responsibility was to keep the LST turning basin at Cua Viet swept of mines.

While these changes were going on up north, reorganization was taking place in the south. Detachment Alfa was increased in strength and recommissioned as Mine Division 112 during the early spring of 1968. Following this Mine Division 113 was created from various assets in the Rung Sat zone. These two units, operating both MSBs and MSMs, effectively contained the mine threat on the Long Tau River. As a result of this the *Viet Cong* began a more active campaign against moored ships using limpet mines carried by swimmers. A number of moored ships and barges were sunk or damaged by these attacks, but increased vigilance on the part of security forces cut down the success of these attacks.

While the communists occasionally made special efforts on the Long Tau and Cua Viet Rivers, notably at the end of 1968 and into early 1969, constant patrolling by the various minesweeping units near Saigon and in I Corps kept both rivers open to traffic. These forces had to be on constant alert since the enemy was always quick to try some new or unorthodox way to lay mines. To counter these attempts, US sailors replied with their own ingenious solutions in this deadly battle of wits. Despite their best efforts, the NVA and VC were unable to stop the flow of men and materials up the rivers, and although the cost was often high, the crews of the minesweepers never failed to keep the waterways open.

HAL-3

While Task Force 116 was formally established in December of 1965, it was some four months before the first PBRs and Swift boats actually began operating along the delta waterways. Their first few engagements taught some hard learned lessons, among which was the need for air support to

To provide bases of operations each of the LSTs assigned to TF 116 was equipped to handle a Detachment of two UH-1 Hueys. This UH-1B gunship takes off from the helicopter deck of Harnett County (LST 821) for a strike against the Viet Cong. These initial Hueys were loaned to the Navy by the 197th AHC until the Navy could procure its own choppers. (US Navy)



counter enemy firepower. While the PBRs and Swift boats carried .50 caliber machine guns, grenade launchers, mortars and other light weapons, they were found to be no match for dug in *Viet Cong* forces with rocket launchers and recoilless rifles. This was brought home during a firefight near Can Tho when PBRs were hit by concealed 57mm recoilless rifles and could not suppress this heavy fire with the weapons on board.

The results of this and other early engagements were reported to naval headquarters in Saigon where the assistant chief-of-staff, Captain John Sheppard saw the reports. After analyzing these reports, he proposed that if the river patrols were to operate effectively they would need air support, specially assigned helicopter gunships. However despite the logic of this and the obvious need of such support, there were problems in organizing such a force. The primary obstacles were the lack of trained Navy aircrews and the lack of helicopters in-country. After discussions with the Army a temporary solution was worked out whereby the 197th Aviation Helicopter Company (197th AHC) provided eight Bell UH-1B gunships to the Navy until they could acquire their own.

Aircrews, however, were harder to come by, but eventually the Navy decided to use personnel from Helicopter Combat Support Squadron One (HC-1) based at Imperial Beach California. This Squadron was essentially a non-combat support unit which had worked mainly in the search and rescue role off of aircraft carriers. Naval authorities felt that these crews could be quickly retrained on the gunships, eliminating the need to wait until new crews could be procured from flight school.

Once this decision was made, volunteers were called for and four detachments of eight pilots and an equal number of aircrewmen were formed. Each detachment was to be equipped with two Army supplied UH-1Bs, which were already in Vietnam. These were the first steps in the process which eventually resulted in the first Navy helicopter attack squadron. By late June of 1966 the lead element, Detachment 29, was ready to ship out. It arrived in Vietnam at the beginning of July under the command of Lieutenant Commander William Rockwell and immediately began training with the 197th AHC. Classes in tactics, maintenance, avionics and airframe characteristics were held daily. Following these classes, familiarization flights and practice missions were flown until the Army instructors were convinced that the Navy personnel were ready. By late summer all four detachments were judged combat ready and on 14 August, the crews moved to the USS Tortuga (LSD 26) for transfer to their assigned bases. A month later, on 19 September, four Navy Detachments (two helicopters each), took over support of TF 116 from Army units.

During their initial deployment the four Detachments were spread out to cover as wide an area as their limited numbers would allow. One two helicopter Detachment, along with the unit's headquarters was located at Vung Tau on the coast, becoming officially known as 'HC-1 Detachment, Vung Tau'. Unofficially the unit was nicknamed 'Rowell's Rats' (exactly how this name came about has yet to be discovered). A second Detachment operated out of Nha Be, a little south of Saigon in the Rung Sat area, a third Detachment was situated toward the center of the Mekong Delta at the river



A Seawolf Huey and the various weapons it carried. Not shown are the .30 and .50 caliber machineguns carried by some ships to counter the VC's increased anti-aircraft defenses which began to be encountered in the mid-1960s. The Seawolf Insignia is carried on the nose and NAVY on the Boom. Some helicopters carried the words UNITED STATES NAVY in black on the boom early in the war. (US Navy via Cressman)

town of Vinh Long, and the fourth Detachment was stationed aboard the USS Comstock (LSD-19), which cruised off the coast. These deployment locations were used until the four specially modified LSTs began arriving in early November of 1966. These LSTs were equipped to provide fuel, munitions, and maintenance facilities for the two UH-1Bs and quarters for the eight aircrews of a detachment. Three of the four LSTs were always on line while the fourth was undergoing replenishment or repair. They operated along the Bassac, Co Chien, and Ham Luong rivers and provided a mobile base from which gunship operations could be carried out.

During this early period the four Detachments took part in numerous actions against the elusive guerrilla forces. On 31 October, they teamed up with PBRs against a VC sampan fleet of seventy-five junks on the My Tho river. During a three hour running battle over fifty of the junks were sunk and a large number of enemy troops killed. In mid-December another VC force was engaged on the My Tho when PBRs ran into heavy fire from fortified positions along the river's edge. Navy gunships were called in to provide support

A detachment of two Hueys operated from this barge at Nha Be. The nearest UH-1 has a .50 caliber machinegun mounted in the starboard door gunner's position. (US Navy)





A UH-1B patrols along a canal in the Mekong Delta in search of the VC. Besides supporting the PBRs HAL-3 also carried out sorties in search of enemy targets of opportunity both during the day and at night. (Bell Helicopter)

and touched off a huge explosion during a firing run. In addition the gunships were also credited with killing fifteen guerrillas and destroying twenty-eight sampans. Such actions became commonplace as Navy crews gained experience and began flying more and more missions in support of the expanding river forces. By early 1967 steps were underway to make the Detachments into a full fledged squadron. This took place on 1 April 1967 when HAL-3 was officially commissioned at its Vung Tau Headquarters. It was the first Navy Squadron ever to be activated in a combat zone.

The upgrading to squadron status brought an influx of men, material, and responsibility. UH-1Bs were received from the 1st Cavalry Division to supplement the original complement of eight Hueys, and additional aircrews and ground support personnel arrived to man them. These increases allowed the squadron to form three more Detachments and expand the area the squadron covered. By the end of 1967 a total of twenty-two gunships were on hand and the various elements were stationed at the following locations:

Detachment	Location
1	Jennings County (LST 846)
2	Nha Be
3	Vinh Long
4	Garrett County (LST 786)
5	Harnett County (LST 821)
6	Dong Tam
7	Binh Thuy

To keep these seven Detachments on line with their fourteen helicopters took a tremendous effort on the part of the ground crews. The remaining eight Hueys of HAL-3 were under constant maintenance in order to keep up the units strength at a full fourteen machines and this was no small accomplishment considering that the majority of the machines already had a great deal of flight time before the army turned them over to the Navy. In addition, since replacements parts had been hard to get at times, many of these UH-1s had received unofficial field modifications by Army personnel to keep them flying. This of course created nightmare maintenance conditions, but despite such obstacles Navy ground crews kept the maximum number of Hueys in the air.

By the end of 1967 things were looking up for HAL-3. With over a year's combat experience under its belt the squadron had become combat seasoned. HAL-3 had learned valuable lessons in that year and proved it could adapt to the constantly changing tactics of the VC and NVA. During this period the squadron officially adopted the name 'Seawolves'. This name had originally been coined by the Army instructors that trained the original four detachments. During early operations the various elements had used 'Seawolves' as its radio call sign and it was only a matter of time until the Hueys of HAL-3 began carrying a large stylized wolf painted on their nose.

Throughout 1967 HAL-3 took part in a great number of varied operations. While their primary job was to support the river forces, Seawolves also provided cover to major land and river operations in the delta region and gave assistance to downed Army helicopters. In addition it carried out medivac operations when the need arose. Squadron personnel experimented with a variety of armament to increase their gunships' efficiency. In the face of growing enemy ground fire, the hand-held M60 machine gun at the door gunner position was replaced with different combinations of .30 and .50 caliber guns to increase the Huey's stand off range. Some gunships flew with a twin .30 caliber mount in place of one of the M-60s while others carried a single .50 caliber machine gun. But while these machine guns provided the necessary range increase, they constantly needed to be reloaded, and many crews disliked them. All three armament combinations were used until the Squadron stood down.

In early 1968, when the *Tet* offensive was launched, the Seawolves helped to hold various delta towns against the surprise attack. Once the communist offensive was blunted the squadron went back to its original mission and helped to retake ground lost during 'Tet'. In late 1968 the Seawolves took part in OPERATION SEALORDS as a blocking force. Some Detachments were shifted closer to Cambodia to help cut the flow of supplies from the 'sanctuaries' there. The Seawolves flew missions in support of ARVN units scattered throughout the delta who quickly came to respect the ability of the Navy gunship crews. HAL-3's response time was outstanding, due in part to the concept of the two-ship element mode of operation. In addition the Seawolves became proficient in flying night missions and often mounted extended night patrols over the rivers and canals in support of PBRs and ARVN forces, or to interdict VC water traffic.

The year of 1969 brought about a number of changes in organization, strength, and assignments. A new squadron headquarters and maintenance facility was completed at Binh Thuy early in the year and the squadron's headquarters moved from Vung Tau. Additional UH-1Bs and newer 'C' models became available to the Navy as the Army began taking delivery of



Seawolves also supported Vietnamese Naval forces in the Delta region. This UH-1 covers the advance of two Vietnamese RAG boats moving up a small stream. In such close conditions air support was vital if the boats were not to blunder into an enemy ambush. (US Navy via Cressman)

Hueys were kept on alert in case trouble arose for the river units. The crew of this ship scramble in response to a call for help from two PBRs caught in a VC ambush. The makeshift revetment protected the copter from VC mortar fire. (US Navy)





A strike by Seawolves against a large motorized VC launch and some smaller junks. In the first photo (Top Left) a Huey can be seen just off center making a firing run on the target. The last photo (Bottom) shows the Huey circling the target area while the motorized launch burns and begins to sink. Such strikes helped destroy the guerrilla supply network in the delta and made it difficult for the VC to adequately support their forces. (US Navy via Cressman)



the new AH-1G Cobra gunship, which resulted in an increase in strength from twenty-two to thirty-three Hueys. HAL-3 also took over the job of a navy utility helicopter detachment known as AIRCOFAT which was based at Saigon. To carry out this additional work HAL-3 received newer UH-1Ls and formed a detachment known as the 'SEALORDS' at Binh Tuy. This small utility detachment carried out liaison duties, mail runs, passenger transportation, supply missions, and SEAL insertions. Later in 1970 additional UH-1Ls were received; eventually all of the Navy UH-1Ls were armed to supplement regular gunships. By the end of 1970 the Navy's helicopter force in the Mekong Delta had reached full strength.

HAL-3 had provided extensive gunship support to the riverines but even with the recent increase in strength the Seawolves were stretched far too thin. A new fixed wing squadron, VAL-4, equipped with OV-10 Broncos was sent to supplement the Seawolves. Early in 1970 HAL-3 Detachments moved closer to the Cambodian border to help cut down on communist infiltration. Unfortunately, when a particular route was closed to the communists they simply switched to another route, lack of numbers prevented HAL-3 from effectively preventing infiltration from Cambodia. In May the Seawolves took part in the invasion of Cambodia. The Naval portion of the Cambodian operation was code named 'TRAN HUNG DAO XI'. HAL-3 encountered little resistance. Detachment 8, aboard the Hunterdon County (LST 838), was responsible for the main support of the Naval forces, while Detachment 9 served as backup and Detachment 5 was held in reserve. As the invasion progressed both the back up and reserve Detachments were called in, as were two additional Detachments, 3 and 4. Elements of the Sealords were also brought in to fly a variety of missions. For political reasons American forces were pulled out of Cambodia at the end of June, with HAL-3 resuming its normal duties in the delta for the remainder of the year with little significant change in operations. A few of the newer C model Hueys were received along with three HH-1K Huey trainers. By year's end the squadron had thirty-seven Hueys on strength, twenty-seven UH-1Bs, two UH-1Cs, four UH-1Ls, and two HH-1Ks. With this additional strength attempts were made to expand operations further into the delta and along the coast, particularly in the Gulf of Thailand.

This expansion of the Seawolves increased the squadron's contact with enemy forces and resulted in high communist losses. Early in 1971, a further responsibility was given to the squadron when Detachment 4 began operating north of Saigon and Detachment 6 carried out flights in support of the Army's 1st and 25th Division's riverine forces near Phu Cuong.

But even as HAL-3's responsibilities were *increased* steps were underway to redeploy the unit. In 1970 ARVN observers had begun flying with the Seawolves acting as interpreters during communication with Vietnamese units. Then, during July of 1971 Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) personnel began arriving for indoctrination and familiarization training with the unit. Already qualified as helicopter aircrew, the VNAF personnel were now to receive training in riverine tactics. After training, some of these VNAF crews eventually were attached to the Seawolves and flew combat missions with them. Through the remainder of 1971, HAL-3 continued to fly support for the Vietnamese Army, the Vietnamese Navy and for the few US units still operating in the area, mainly SEALs. It also updated its UH-1Cs to M standards with newer, more powerful engines.

As 1972 approached, orders came down for the Seawolves to prepare to stand down. At Binh Thuy on 26 January 1972 HAL-3 officially ceased operations. This marked the end of five long years of hard work throughout the Mekong Delta and adjacent areas. While statistics could be cited to show how effective the Seawolves were against the VC and NVA, perhaps the best testimony to HAL-3's outstanding performance can be summed up in the words of a decorated PBR sailor. Of the Seawolves he commented, "They only had one fault — there was never enough of them."