

# ENEMY SUPPLY LINES ASSAULTED

The Viet Cong thought their inland waterway supply lines were safe from attack. But the brown-water navy's Operation Giant Slingshot soon proved otherwise.

*By John F. Wukovits*

**L**ieutenant junior grade Michael Bernique had certainly been in more pleasant situations than this court-martial hearing before his naval superiors in Saigon.

On October 14, 1968, Bernique and his crew of a fast patrol craft rested in the South Vietnamese city of Ha Tien on the Gulf of Thailand, when word reached him that a Viet Cong tax collector had set up a collecting station only a few miles away on a nearby river. Ignoring the fact that the waterway had been declared off-limits because it ran close to the Cambodian border, Bernique and crew hustled to the craft, swooped in on the unsuspecting station with guns firing away, seized documents and equipment from the fleeing Viet Cong, and then returned to Ha Tien.

Bernique's aggressiveness angered many of his superiors. As he responded to heated questioning at the hearing, one man who listened with intense interest was Vice Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., who only two weeks before had assumed his position as Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, the first three-star naval officer assigned to that billet. At one point, an officer informed Bernique that Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was then blistering Bernique's action and accusing him of shooting into Cambodia and killing innocent civilians. Bernique angrily responded, "Well, you tell Sihanouk he's a lying SOB."

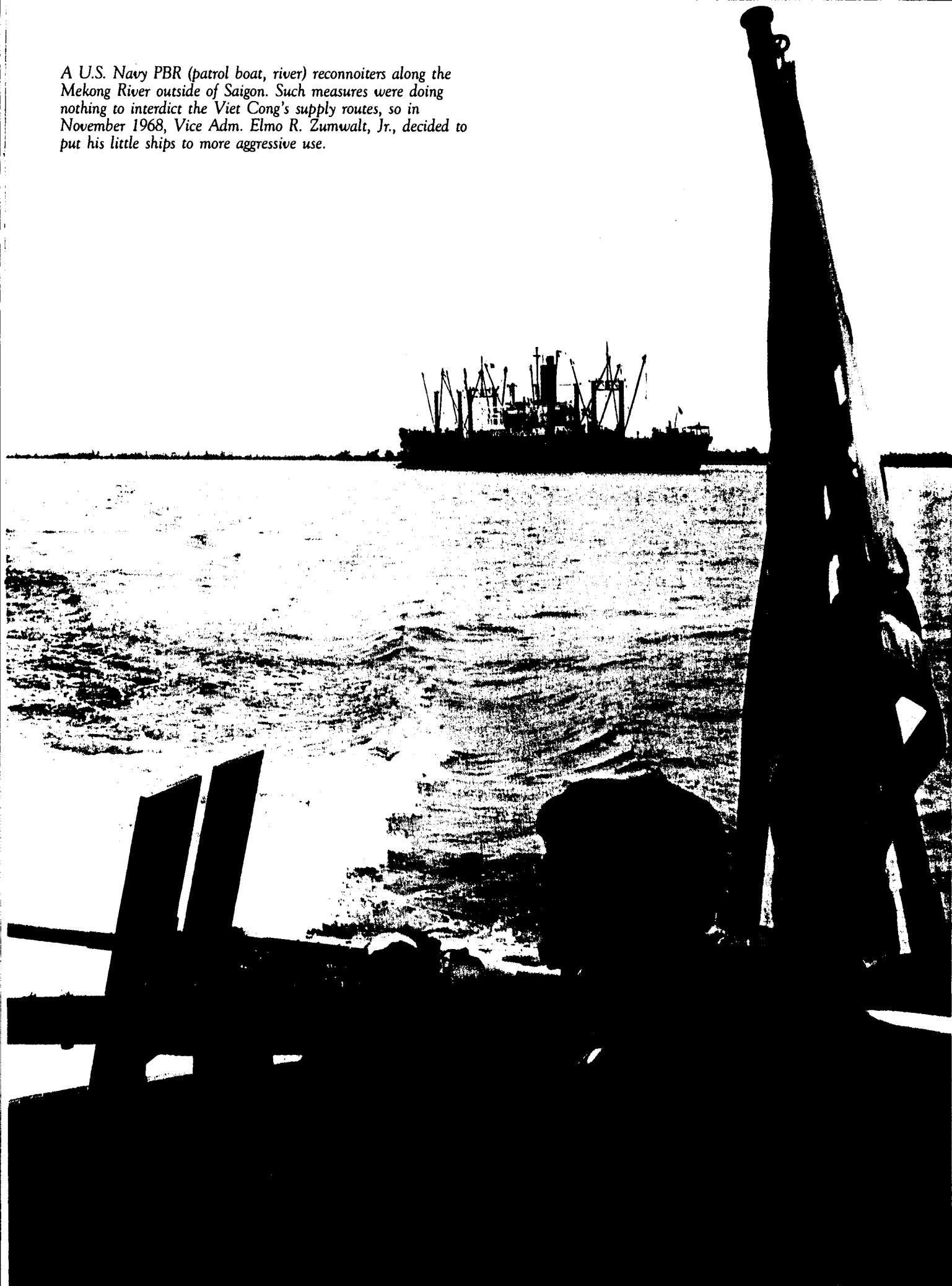
Zumwalt, who hoped to turn American naval operations in South Vietnam into a more aggressive presence, instantly warmed to this assertive officer. Instead of approving a court-martial, the new commander awarded Bernique a Silver Star on the spot, claiming he was the type of officer "we need more of." The U.S. Navy, as well as the Viet Cong forces, were about to experience a new style of naval warfare, implemented by a commander willing to try unorthodox methods.

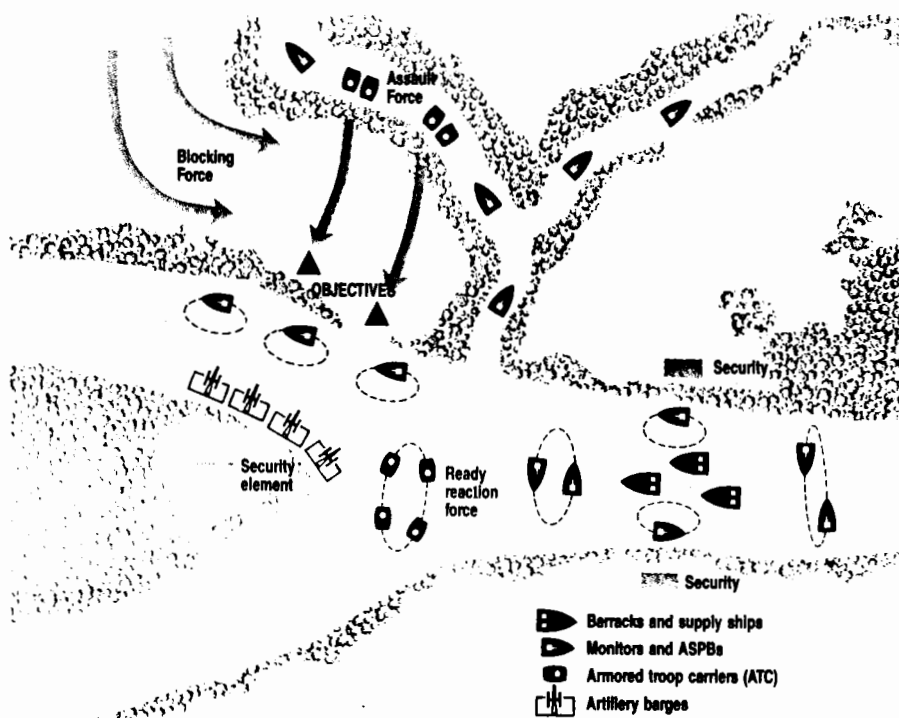
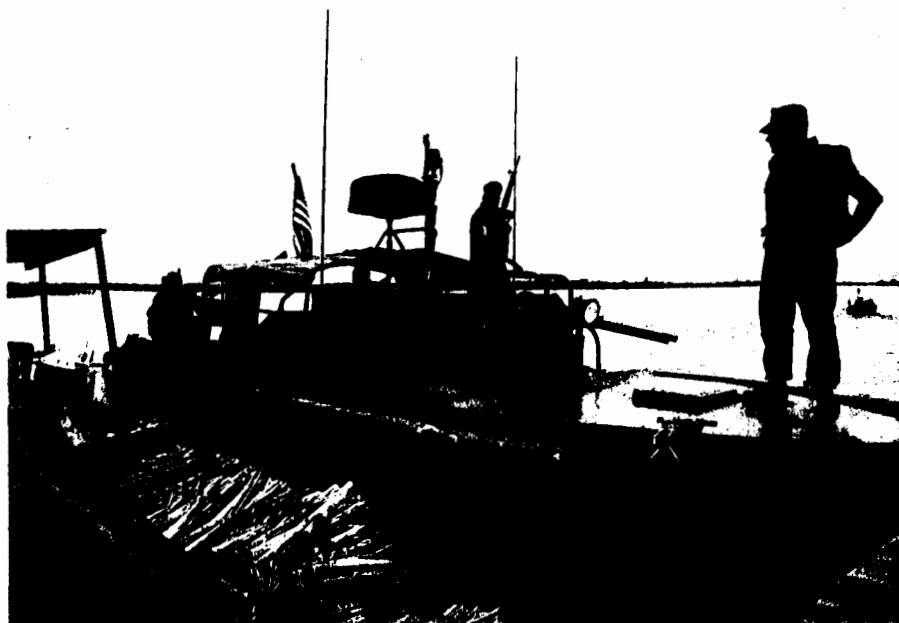
Before 1965 the Navy could put few patrol craft into South Vietnamese inland waters because most new construction focused on major warships to counter the Soviet threat. In June 1965, however, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke stated the Navy would have to assume an increased "brown water" role because of an intensified enemy effort to resupply its forces in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese Navy could not stem this threat alone and Burke understood that to successfully counter enemy forces, the Navy must cut off inland supply routes, mainly by developing a mobile patrol force along the Cambodian and Laotian borders and throughout rivers in the Mekong Delta, long considered an enemy stronghold.

The first large Navy operation, called Market Time, began on March 3, 1965, after a U.S. Army helicopter pilot sighted a camouflaged 100-ton North Vietnamese trawler unloading supplies in an isolated cove in Vung Ro Bay along South Vietnam's central coast. Four air strikes left the trawler resting on its side and confirmed that the enemy was moving large amounts of supplies into South Vietnam by water. In response, the Navy and Coast Guard established a 40-mile zone extending from the coast in which all ships were subject to search.

While this helped reduce the flow of supplies coming in by sea, Market Time did nothing to hinder the avalanche of munitions pouring across the Cambodian border. Cambodia's leader, Prince Sihanouk, permitted North Vietnamese freighters to unload their cargoes at Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand, from where they were shunted across Cambodia to the South Vietnamese boundary, and then taken by watercraft through the Mekong Delta to enemy troops by means of the region's numerous rivers and canals. Operation Game Warden started on December 18, 1965, "to assist the Govern-

*A U.S. Navy PBR (patrol boat, river) reconnoiters along the Mekong River outside of Saigon. Such measures were doing nothing to interdict the Viet Cong's supply routes, so in November 1968, Vice Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., decided to put his little ships to more aggressive use.*





TOP: A PBR crew searches a local sampan for Viet Cong weaponry. Judging his riverine forces to be ineffectively underutilized, Zumwalt decided to improvise. ABOVE: A typical riverine operation ideally involved a swift and coordinated response by river craft, helicopters or amphibious troops to the discovery of enemy activity.

ment of South Vietnam in denying the enemy the use of the major rivers of the Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone."

Groups of ten Mark-I river patrol boats (PBRs) cruised along pre-designated sections of rivers and canals to counter Viet Cong movement. Based at first from LSTs (landing ship, tank) anchored at various river mouths, these swift craft sported a .50-caliber machine gun aft and a rapid-fire 40mm grenade launcher and quickly became the backbone of naval operations in the delta region. Before long, home bases advanced from river mouths, where the waters often turned choppy, to calmer bases along riverbanks or afloat on huge barges.

Though successful to a degree, this River Patrol Force did not have sufficient PBRs to effectively patrol the vast delta river network, so it focused on the major waterways. All the enemy had to do was switch to any of the countless smaller

rivers and canals, increase their caution, and a steady flow of munitions continued. A Riverine Assault Force, combining fast river craft with troops who debarked to engage in search-and-destroy missions, helped, but still the enemy poured in supplies to its troops.

Zumwalt, an imaginative commander who believed the 38,000-man Vietnamese Navy was being underutilized, jumped into action after his intelligence adviser, Captain Rex Rectanus, concluded that though Market Time drastically reduced supplies from the sea and Game Warden interdicted major rivers, the enemy enjoyed command of smaller rivers and canals. The Tet Offensive bluntly, and bloodily, illustrated that the enemy's capacity for resupplying its forces had suffered little harm. The admiral, whose frequent unorthodox ideas were called "ZWI's" (Zumwalt's wild ideas) by his staff, told senior commanders that inland, or brown-water warfare was so new that it had not yet become burdened with rigid doctrine, and he urged them to use initiative and improvisation.

"You have to make up riverine warfare as you go along," he mentioned, and then added he wanted them to keep the enemy off balance by constantly changing their tactics. "You can get away with almost anything once or twice, but you must change strategies frequently in order to keep the enemy from exploiting you."

Zumwalt created a bolder strategy for the inland Navy called Sea Lords, which stood for Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy. It consisted of two phases. In the first, a series of barrier operations would place an interdiction line across rivers and canals flowing parallel to the Cambodian border. This line eventually would stretch from the Gulf of Thailand, through the Mekong Delta, to Saigon. The second phase called for units to thrust into areas previously considered Viet Cong strongholds, such as the U Minh Forest, Ca Mau Peninsula and locations in the delta. Zumwalt emphasized quick strikes wherever possible and better coordination with ground and air forces to ensure the enemy could not escape by melting into the terrain. As the

process of Vietnamization had already begun, he also wanted to gradually bring in elements of the South Vietnamese Navy as soon as possible. To increase the available PBRs, Zumwalt switched craft from Market Time to patrol major rivers, thereby freeing additional PBRs for his assaults on lesser waterways.

The four barrier operations began on November 2, 1968, when PBRs appeared along canals in the upper Mekong Delta in Operation Search Turn. That was quickly followed by Foul Deck on November 16, which placed PBRs in rivers and canals closer to the Cambodian border, and Barrier Reef on January 1, 1969, which connected Search Turn and Foul Deck barriers southwest of Saigon with two rivers flowing near the capital. By early 1969, Naval forces patrolled a lengthy interdiction barrier running from the Gulf of Thailand to Tay Ninh, northwest of Saigon.



*A flotilla of PBRs and support craft approach a Viet Cong stronghold on Tan Dinh Island at the start of Operation Dragoon II on March 26, 1968. Operation Giant Slingshot, initiated on December 6, aimed even deeper into enemy-held territory.*

The most productive operation, however, proved to be Giant Slingshot. Begun on December 6, 1968, the operation aimed at stemming Viet Cong movement from the area known as the Parrot's Beak, a portion of Cambodian territory that jutted perilously close to Saigon and was used by the enemy for resupply and sanctuary. Two rivers, the Vam Co Dong and the Vam Co Tay, skirted the Parrot's Beak on either side, forming a Y-shaped natural barrier (thus the name Giant Slingshot) enclosing the easternmost tip of the Parrot's Beak. Studying the area, Zumwalt saw an opportunity to contain the enemy with vigorous patrolling and surprise tactics.

The operation's commander, Captain Arthur W. Price, Jr., established his base at Tan An, near the junction of the two rivers. He also ordered the installation of six advanced tactical support bases (ATSBs) along the rivers since his PBRs would operate as many as 50 miles upstream from Tan An. These strange fixtures, composed of giant pontoons supporting base facilities that were moored to the riverbanks, were placed at Tra Cu, Hiep Hoa, Go Dua Ha and Ben Keo on the Vam Co Dong, and at Tuyen Nhon and Moc Hoa on the Vam Co Tay. To carry out his task, Price received a variety of forces, including fifty PBRs, two Vietnamese Navy river assault interdiction divisions, Army helicopters and artillery.

ATSBs contained living quarters, a galley and docking space for PBRs. Since they remained stationary, electronic sensors, trip flares and Claymore mines protected ATSBs from surprise attack. Should the enemy try an assault, potent firepower on board each base, plus lethal fire from river craft, would exact a heavy toll. One officer who served aboard the ATSB at Go Dau Ha, Lt. Cmdr. Robert C. Powers, later stated that for a change, "the Viet Cong found that the Navy had come to stay," a sentiment warmly endorsed by Zumwalt.

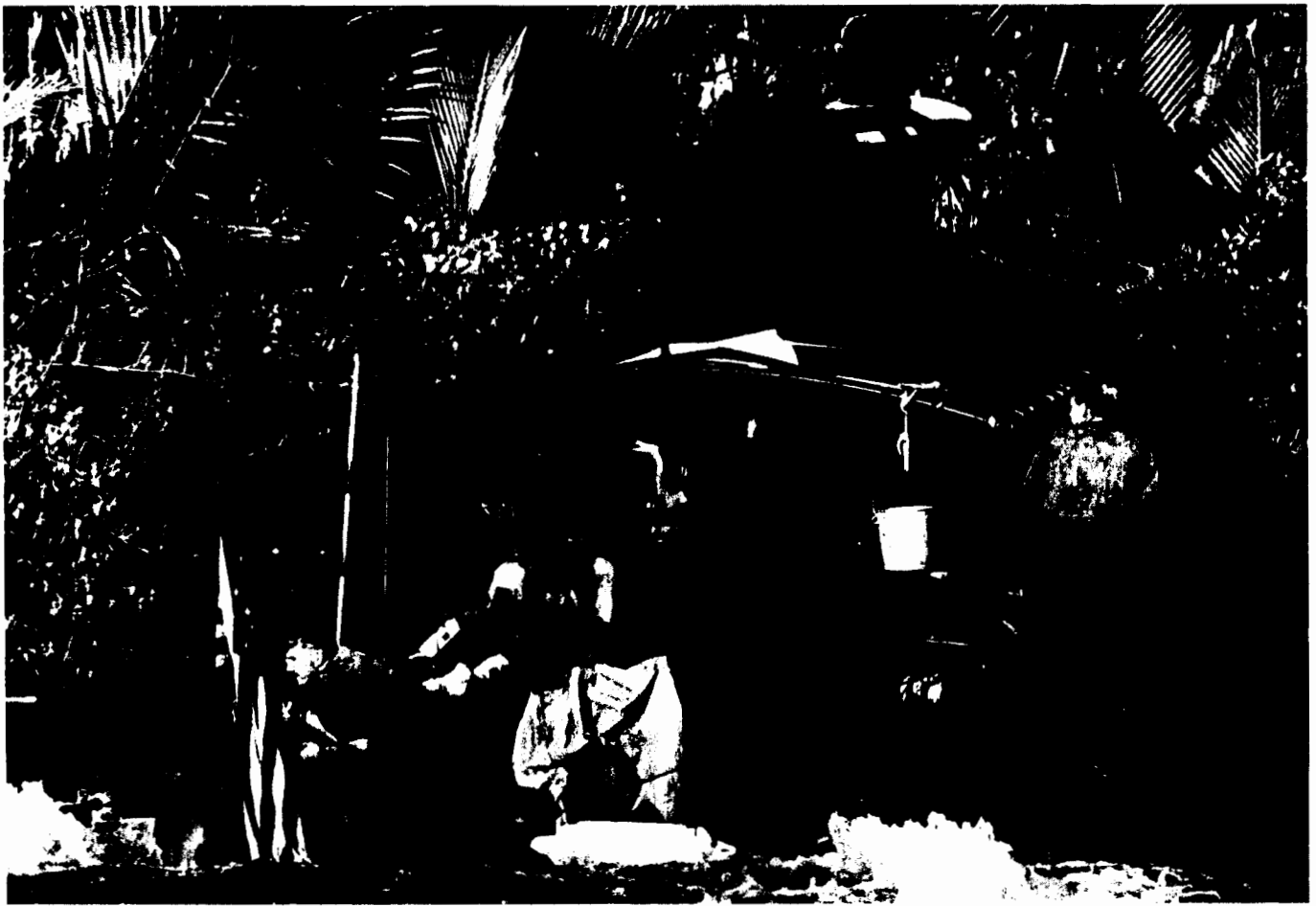
The enemy response came quickly. On the operation's first day, an Army helicopter flying surveillance along the Vam

Co Dong received ground fire. Two PBRs moved in and, after a brief fire fight, silenced the enemy machine gun. The next day two additional fire fights occurred, and one week later, rocket and machine-gun fire straddled two PBRs on the Vam Co Dong, causing six wounded and one killed. No previous operation had received such a speedy, hostile reaction, so Zumwalt knew Giant Slingshot would be bloody.

As always, Zumwalt emphasized a variety of tactics. One of the main maneuvers of Giant Slingshot was the waterborne ambush, a nighttime PBR operation emphasizing stealth over speed. Rather than patrolling up and down rivers and canals, PBRs silently blended into the riverbank foliage and waited for enemy movement. With 50 boats available, Price could place PBRs along many different stretches of the two rivers. Often, PBRs approached their ambush sites in pairs, with one craft towing a second, and then cutting it loose when they neared the location so it could silently drift to shore.

Engineman First Class John S. Babcock sat through 172 ambushes in his year of duty along the Vam Co Tay. "We had a four-man crew—an engineer, forward gunner, aft gunner, and the boat captain, which was me on my PBR. Each night before sunset we'd head out for our night ambush, approach the shore, then hook a line to the overgrowth and wait while the mosquitoes ate us up. We always went in pairs of two PBRs to have more firepower. We were supposed to stop enemy movements, and we'd see action about every fifth time. We'd stay at our post until daylight, then return to Moc Hoa.

"Where I was, there was an 8 p.m. curfew for river traffic, so anything that moved we shot at. Usually the targets were sampans. One night, two PBRs about 1,000 yards above us spotted some Viet Cong, opened fire until they scattered, then left for Moc Hoa (they were supposed to do that because their position was given away by the gunfire). We stayed behind, and about one hour later the enemy returned, not thinking



*Their hull staved in during an enemy ambush, the crewmen of an assault support patrol boat run their craft ashore and await evacuation while the gunners return fire. Their violent response to Giant Slingshot implied that the VC appreciated its potential.*

any more PBRs would be around. They marched right near us and we killed them all—near fifty—just like sitting ducks.”

Frequently, Giant Slingshot involved coordinated operations between the Army and Navy. Soldiers placed on PBRs would disembark when the enemy was sighted, or long range reconnaissance patrols (LRRPs) were inserted and picked up by Navy craft. In mid-April 1969, company-strength units dashed ashore to search for the enemy while supporting PBRs set up a blocking force.

“We were closely coordinated with chopper support,” recalls Babcock. “No way would I go out without the support. If we ran into anything, they could get there within 2-3 minutes.”

Double Shift, one of the largest and most successful joint operations during Giant Slingshot, occurred in July when intelligence reports indicated an enemy buildup for an attack on Tay Ninh, Vietnam’s third-largest city. If the Viet Cong captured Tay Ninh, they planned to set up a provisional government with Tay Ninh as its capital in hopes of gaining recognition from other nations who wanted to end the lengthy war. Such a propaganda coup could not be permitted, so Price moved 30 PBRs to the two ATSBs in the Tay Ninh region. After completing the hasty switch, one commander with a touch of humor reported to Price, “Double Shift completed in double time with doubled units ready to give double trouble.”

Constant patrols and waterborne ambushes over the next 15 days resulted in 136 fire fights, in which 90 enemy structures and craft were destroyed and 34 confirmed enemy soldiers killed. This vigorous response forced the Viet Cong to abandon their planned attack on Tay Ninh.

Giant Slingshot also employed some of the newest military tools, such as a remote electronic detection device that alert-

ed soldiers and PBRs to enemy movements while still a distance away. One radar implement disclosed metal substances in watercraft, while another spotted false bottoms. ~~About~~ comically termed the “Douche Boat” sported two high-pressure water pumps which propelled water streams at enemy locations and defensive positions with such force they could actually disintegrate cement.

The enemy’s ferocious response to Giant Slingshot showed the operation was having an impact. Viet Cong propaganda leaflets attempted to counter American moves, and signs appeared along waterways warning, “We Kill Americans.” Enemy troops hid in trees or in mud along riverbanks waiting for PBRs to churn into firing range. River mines, some so powerful they could totally destroy a boat, erupted at any time. A favorite enemy tactic was to plant one mine ahead of a large group. When the first mine detonated, the usual response by PBR commanders was to dash straight ahead at top speed—directly into the waiting group of mines. After one mine went off and almost destroyed the PBR commanded by Admiral Zumwalt’s son, Elmo, a crew member stepped ashore and followed the wire 100 yards into the jungle where the enemy soldier had been waiting. There, stuck in the ground, were two sticks serving as sights. “When our boat moved in between those two sticks,” Lieutenant Zumwalt recalled, “we were like a target in the cross-hairs of a telescopic sight. The triggerman yanked the trip wire, and the mines exploded.”

So many fire fights occurred in Giant Slingshot that new designations appeared to make paperwork easier. “ENIFFs” referred to enemy-initiated fire fights, “FRIFFs” covered friendly-initiated fire fights, “ENENGs” meant fire commenced by the enemy but was not returned, and “FRENGs” detailed fire fights started by friendly fire but not answered

by the enemy. Enemy-initiated fire fights so often flared along the Vam Co Dong between Tra Cu and Go Dua Ha that the stretch was labeled "Blood Alley."

As a result, Giant Slingshot brought in the highest casualty rates of the war for the Navy. The total ENIFFs and FRIFFs alone for this action more than doubled all other barrier operations combined. In the 515 days it lasted before being turned over to the South Vietnamese in May 1970, Navy craft engaged in over 1,000 fire fights, an average of two each day. Thirty-eight members of the U.S. Navy died and 518 suffered wounds, more wounds than the number of men who served in Giant Slingshot. On the other hand, 266 enemy supply caches were seized, totaling 150 tons of ammunition and 400 tons of other materials.

Warfare along the rivers and canals proved as bitter as any other type. On August 6, 1969, a forward air controller spotted Viet Cong along the Vam Co Dong two miles south of Hip Hoa. One of the PBRs answering the call carried a long range reconnaissance patrol, which jumped off to counter the enemy. The LRRP encountered more VC than expected and was quickly pinned down. Sailors on the PBR grabbed rifles and first-aid kits, leapt into the jungle, fought their way to the surrounded soldiers and brought them back to the craft at the cost of two killed and four wounded.

On another operation, Radarman 3rd Class Virgil Chambers rested on the forward deck of his craft, manning an M-60 machine gun, while it entered a canal. Suddenly, he spotted a wire stretched across the canal, and since part of his duty was to cut such wires, he reached for the bolt cutters to begin. As he grabbed for the wire, which could have been an enemy warning alert or a trip wire for an explosive, rockets erupted close by. Chambers' craft suddenly lurched ahead, causing him to be pinned to the pilothouse by the wire. For a few terrifying seconds Chambers worried that he would be cut in two, but fortunately the wire broke loose as the craft pulled away.

During a subsequent operation that resulted in a number of medals for bravery, five PBRs churned up the Kinh Dong Tien Canal in late January 1969. Ahead, Viet Cong soldiers placed straw and elephant grass in the water so it would float downstream and clog up the boat intakes. When the five PBRs drew closer to the ambush, machine-gun fire and rockets poured down. On one PBR, Chief Quartermaster William J. Thompson and Yeoman 1st Class G.H. Childress were knocked unconscious by two rockets that hammered the craft. When he regained his senses, Childress attempted to move the PBR but straw in its pumps caused it to stall.

Childress enticed the damaged craft close to shore and ordered the men off. All five headed for a muddy drainage ditch while the other four PBRs darted out of enemy range. In a few minutes, though, they returned to pick up Childress' group. One craft ignored heavy enemy fire to approach shore. On the bow, Chief Boatswain's Mate Quincy Truett returned fire while shouting for the five to scamper aboard. The craft could only wait long enough to retrieve one man at a time before heading away from the murderous fire. Four additional times Truett's PBR chugged near shore, with Truett spreading covering fire. On the final trip, Childress darted toward the craft, where Truett reached down to pull him on board. As Childress climbed over the side, Truett suddenly slumped to the deck from a fatal throat wound. Chief Thompson grabbed Truett's gun to continue the fire, but he also fell mortally wounded. During the extraction, Seawolf helicopters swooped in for support and lost one chopper in the process. Thompson received the Silver Star, Childress and crew were awarded the Navy Commendation Medal, and Quincy Truett was honored with the Navy's second-highest award, the Navy Cross.

Admiral Zumwalt endangered his own life with frequent visits to various river operations. He realized before design-



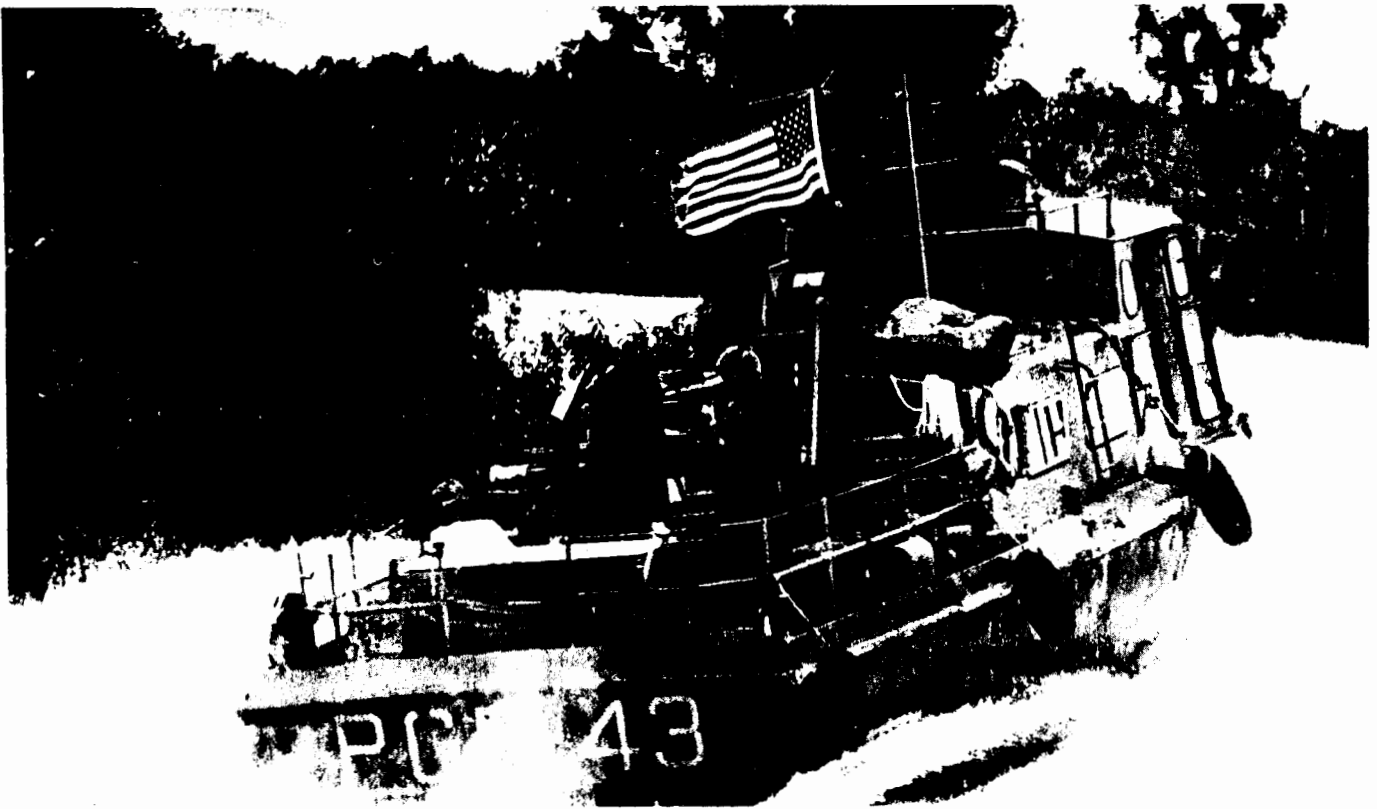
*A PBR crew searches for arms caches along the riverbank in February 1969. An important element of Slingshot involved the elimination of the VC's supplies in the Mekong Delta.*

ing Sea Lords that the Navy role in South Vietnam was diminished, causing low morale. Each morning his staff pored through reports of the previous day's fighting to locate the two hottest areas. Zumwalt immediately visited those men to ask about their missions or any problems they experienced, and often decorated men right on the spot rather than wait for the tedious paperwork to catch up. Thus a PBR crew could engage in a bitter fire fight one day, and be debriefed the next by Zumwalt. During one visit, Zumwalt rode on the river patrol boats of two separate officers, one on the Vam Co Tay and the other on the Vam Co Dong. Within a few hours of his visit, both officers were killed in ambushes.

After the four barrier operations were under way, Zumwalt originated another scheme which he called "one of my favorite wild ideas." He wanted the Navy to wrest control of a major river running through the Ca Mau Peninsula so local inhabitants would return and revitalize the area. His notion, called Sea Float, called for 11 huge pontoons to be latched together, then anchored in the Cua Lon River at Nam Cam, a city of 4,000 largely deserted after being overrun during the Tet Offensive. If he could entice residents to return to Nam Cam, initiative would be grabbed from the enemy and a stirring propaganda victory ensured.

In June 1969, the pontoons were pulled upriver and anchored into position. Manned by 200 personnel, Sea Float was protected by shore sensors, upstream netting to snare possible mines, and bristled with 81mm mortars, .50-caliber machine guns, M-60 machine guns and numerous smaller weapons. Combined with the armament of naval craft moored at any time and available helicopter support, Sea Float all but dared the enemy to approach. In case any Viet Cong tried





*Patrol craft PCF-43 closes for a firing run in February 1969. Casualties during Operation Giant Slingshot were the Navy's heaviest of the war, but being able to come to grips with the enemy raised morale, and the Sea Lords gave better than they got.*

to brave the swift current and swim toward Sea Float; men would periodically drop hand grenades overboard, resulting every so often in a dead enemy floating to the surface.

Sea Float added a new dimension by combining military patrols, searches and ambushes with assistance to the local population. Medical help became available, a sampan repair shop and ax-sharpening facility (woodcutting was one of the area's prime economic activities) opened on Sea Float, and schools were constructed. Gradually, residents began reappearing in the region.

Staying with his strategy of keeping the enemy off balance, Zumwalt ordered search operations against Viet Cong strongholds in the Ca Mau, U Minh Forest and islands throughout the Mekong Delta. Nighttime fire fights so brightened the skies that Electrician's Mate 3rd Class Richard L. Aitchison recalls "we always called them Fourth of July actions." One of the strangest operations occurred in May, when ponderous CH-54 Sky Crane helicopters lifted six PBRs out of the water and flew them from the Vam Co Dong 16 miles to another enemy position on the upper Saigon River. Had the PBRs gone by water, the trip would have lasted four days. By air, the craft sped up the Saigon within three hours and scattered the surprised enemy. When Admiral John S. McCain, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, was later briefed by Zumwalt, he smiled and wondered how the unorthodox admiral would explain the circumstance had one of his PBRs been "shot down" while out of water.

Zumwalt's two-year Sea Lords campaigns proved to be some of the most successful of the war. Enemy supplies were seized and their flow reduced, rivers became safer for civilians, and Viet Cong tax collectors were forced back. The four barrier operations succeeded in capturing 331 enemy soldiers and killing another 2,788. These accomplishments came, as one historian explains, after beginning "from a sleeping, not a running, or even a standing, start" that involved less than half of one percent of the Americans in South Vietnam and used relatively inexpensive river craft. The telling statistic took place

during the 1972 enemy Easter Offensive, when they hit other portions of the country but remained relatively quiet in the Mekong Delta.

The operations dramatically boosted Navy morale in South Vietnam by giving officers and sailors a recognizable front in which to combat the enemy and bring back measurable returns. A barrier stretching from the Gulf of Thailand to Saigon belonged to them, as opposed to many other sections of South Vietnam where the front was never clearly defined. Zumwalt also ensured that his officers received recognition for their work by constantly requesting the Bureau of Personnel to assign them choice assignments after their Vietnam service.

The Navy paid a price, though. Its unfamiliarity with river operations in the beginning (in peacetime that duty belongs to the Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers), and the selecting of enemy strongholds as its objective led to soaring casualty rates, a fact that bothered Zumwalt but that he felt was unavoidable. In turn, the kill ratio for Sea Lords approached an impressive 30-1 ratio.

In recognition of their outstanding courage, three ships were later named after men who participated in Sea Lords. The destroyer USS *Truett* was named for Quincy Truett, the gunner who braved enemy fire to help rescue fellow sailors, while the destroyers USS *Elliot* and USS *Peterson* were designated after two commanders killed in action near the Parrot's Beak.

By 1972 all Sea Lords operations had been handed over to the South Vietnamese Navy. Zumwalt could take satisfaction that, in the words of one historian, Sea Lords "drastically reduced communist military strength" near Saigon and in the Mekong Delta. □

*John F. Wukovits, a frequent contributor to Vietnam Magazine, wishes to thank Edward J. Marolda of the Naval Historical Center for helping in the research for this article. For further reading, try Victor Croizat's The Brown Water Navy: The River and Coastal War in Indochina and Vietnam 1948-1972 (Blandford Press, 1984).*