

Phone:  
FAX:  
E-mail:



**Earl "Rex" Rectanus  
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired)**

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## The Naval Intelligence Organization Vietnam (NAVINTFOV)

### I. Background: The Naval Defensive Strategy.

#### The Naval Advisory Organization.

Prior to August 1968, the U.S. naval forces in South Vietnam were basically a defensive and passive force whose objective was to assist the VNN in its operations and to train and support those forces in limiting the introduction of enemy weapons and military equipment by sea and major waterways of SVN.

The organization established to accomplish this mission was originally the Navy division of the MAAG, the military assistance advisory group. The naval organization provided advisors to the VNN for all aspects of in-country naval operations from supply and management to the operation of boats and craft, ordnance, communications, security and yes, intelligence.

This myriad of advisory functions was coordinated by the Senior Naval Advisor (SNA), a Navy Captain, physically located in the Headquarters of the VNN.

#### The Commander Naval Forces Vietnam.

Basically, COMNAVFORV commanded the Naval Advisory Group and fulfilled other functions of a component commander including the naval requirements process, the planning and execution of all aspects of VNN forces and the extensive services of common support to all US and friendly forces in SVN. The staff intelligence function was primarily to support COMNAVFORV and the other Services with maritime information and to provide intelligence including the sanitization of "Codeword" sources to the Naval Advisory Group and all other naval entities in SVN.

The core of this defensive strategy, as far as the Navy was concerned was the *Market Time* and *Game Warden* operations which while assisting the VNN, conducted other operations in which training was "hands-on" combat. The extensive use of off-shore surveillance aircraft and the closer destroyer barriers, essentially were not in-country operations and had no VNN association. While these were under the control of CTF 115, the off-shore barrier of the SWIFTS were the keys to the day to day interdiction effort. Due to the nature of these operations in both *Market Time* and *Game Warden*, dedicated intelligence capabilities were provided to the Coastal Zone and Riverine commanders' staffs; these functions, supported by HQ intelligence, were the primary tactical intelligence support in the defensive passive phase of naval operations.

The Mobile Riverine Force with its 9<sup>th</sup> (US Infantry) Division had it's own organic intelligence capabilities and operated mostly under the Province and US Corps commanders and are not critical to the NAVINTFOV story. Under certain tactical situations under SEALORDS, we did attach NILOs on an ad-hoc basis.

It should be noted that the Naval Intelligence Liaison Officers (NILOs) were in the Advisory chain of command as was the Coastal and Riverine commands to whom they reported. The Coastal and Riverine commanders also had an operational role under CTF 115 and 116, but because of the basic passive operations of 115 and 116, timely all-source support (sanitized) was generally not required of the organic intelligence capabilities of either the task force staffs or the advisory NILOs.

## **II. The Sea Change in Strategy- SEALORDS**

There are several fundamentals which are important in understanding SEALORDS and the creation of the NAVINTFOV:

a. CTF 115 was basically a fleet of one class of ship (boat) ... very heavily armed, good endurance, able to take punishment, suited to the job of coastal surveillance and had a commissioned officer as the OinC. It, along with the other *Market Time* barrier forces was "over-qualified" for the job it was now required to do. It was comparatively overstaffed with established bases and infrastructure in performing its functions dictated by the Navy and carried out by the then COMNAVFORV.

b. CTF 116 was basically a fleet of one class of ship (boat), small, lightly armed, fast, not able to take too much punishment....well suited to the job of major river routine search with much available back up when needed ... not only in the form of SEAWOLVES etc but also from the dense population in the Delta. It was comparatively overstaffed with established bases and infrastructure in performing its functions dictated by the Navy and carried out by the then COMNAVFORV.

c. The Mobile Riverine Force (CTF 117) was in effect the armada of the Delta and was credited by Gen Abrams as saving the Delta in TET 1968. Its operations were grand in scale with complex coordination with the Provinces, air assets and river 'blocking' forces. There was never any question that if the enemy was caught in the MRF web, he had little chance. On the other hand, it was impossible to keep secret the movement of the MRF, only its intentions.

In the context of the above, Zumwalt was sent to Vietnam and given three stars to change the Navy's role. About two-three weeks after his arrival, Secretary Ignacius came to Saigon and the Admiral asked me to write the briefing (I had been on the problem for the previous two years as CINCPAC, ADM Sharp's Chief of Current Intelligence). It did not take long for ADM Zumwalt to realize that the present passive/defensive strategy had no strategic validity.

In August/September, it was pretty much understood and accepted that the Navy could construct a strategic interdiction strategy which could seal the infiltration from Ho Chi Minh Trail/Cambodia into III and IV Corps (the heart of SVN). He ordered ACOS (I) to Binh Tuy to contribute to the Campaign plan to be called SEALORDS. This plan was to utilize the strengths

noted heretofore of all Navy elements in an aggressive campaign, primarily in the Delta (III and IV Corps) but throughout SVN the VC/NVA which had controlled the Delta for over twenty years would now have an adversary. No longer would the "secret zones" and safe havens controlled by the VC/NVA/COSVN be sanctuaries.

Therefore, we could no longer be an "advisory" organization. The Soviet/Sino support had been allowed to build up (Port of Sihanoukville etc). We no longer could use the stove-pipe intelligence support to 115 because we have taken their boats and sent them offensively against the 20-year occupation of the Delta...for example. Intelligence info on coastal infiltration was no longer useful in fighting the enemy in the Delta. We had taken the PBRs, light and small as they were and gave them more offensive operations, into a SEALORDS operation. We had taken the great battleships of the MRF from their parent.

When Zumwalt wanted to move forces, it was not a "planning" exercise...there had to be intelligence support which could tie in and support the forces he was sending to places the Navy had NEVER been before. The static bases of 115, 116 and 117 could not fill the support requirement.

### **III. The Naval Intelligence Field Organization Vietnam (NAVINTFOV).**

How does one undertake an operation (like *Sea Float*) which many said could not be done....and make it a reality in weeks. Or, combine the forces of three disparate missions with the equipment designed for these missions with their logistic trains and their staffs and institutional allegiances and integrate them into a new mission ...especially a mission that includes casualties from the enemy when some thought they were doing their obligated service in a 'safe' environment of patrolling and inspections for contraband?

The design of the NAVINTFOV was a response to the new concept of naval warfare required by SEALORDS. It involved the interaction of many diverse intelligence collection and analytical assets from a myriad of sources and tailoring a product useful to a very low tactical echelon of operations. It also had to take into account the various requirements of the different operational assets involved in the coordination of SWIFTS, Pars, MRF units in armed reconnaissance operations and especially the concept of rapid deployment to new areas in response to COMNAVFORV's reading of the changing enemy situation.

To support operations of units relatively devoid of their bases and sources of support, especially intelligence, into an area where RVN and US /Provincial/Phoenix/etc. forces were involved required officers who were unique and who could exercise innovation and initiative. Probably in no previous engagement of US forces did we rely on the good judgment of the intelligence officers on independent duty with a minimum of oversight and supervision. While by design and necessity, oversight and supervision had to be an important consideration, it had to be done with the least organizational resources.

The organization of the NAVINTFOV was based on the following elements:

- a. Maximum use of existing resources.
- b. Mobility of intelligence assets
- c. Decentralization of assets/Control and Supervision

### Maximum Use of Existing Resources:

A very short time after the arrival of VADM Zumwalt, maybe two months or so, the concept of SEALORDS was staffed and ordered implemented; the first operations began in October. While latter infusion of intelligence assets was accomplished, initially, total dependence was placed on the Coastal Zones and Riverine Areas and the Naval Intelligence Liaison Officers (NILO). This was accomplished by fiat by COMNAVFORV in that he ordered all existing NILOs to be placed under his staff operational control (ACOS (Intelligence) and removed from the Advisory Group chain of command. The subsequent physical relocations and substantive intelligence collection and analysis were dedicated to the SEALORDS operation.

The Coastal Zone and Riverine Area staffs were 'double hatted' to N-2 so that direct intelligence coordination could be developed and maintained in a rapidly changing environment. It is important to note here that while this change in "command" vitally effected those staffs and NILOs where SEALORDS operations took place, many NILOs probably saw little change in their duties...especially in II Corps and in I Corps. It is however acknowledged that for all intelligence assets, the "Advisory" function took on different emphasis as a 'hands on' offensive/training approach.

The COMNAVFORV intelligence staff was reoriented in analysis to support offensive operations. Field personnel management, logistics and upper level coordination with the other US and SVN agencies were new activities together with operational support innovations (such as the all-source Tactical Analysis Plot), were developed in addition to the normal functions involved in supporting the COMNAVFORV.

All field intelligence officers had orders signed personally by COMNAVFORV, and all problems with field officers by any agency of the US or RVN were dealt with by the N2 exclusively. (sometimes with the 'cooperation' of the MPs)

### Mobility of Intelligence Assets

NAVINTFOV was built on the premise that to support a Campaign whose objective was to take back the territory 'owned' by terror and intimidation by the VC/NVA over the previous twenty years, it must be 'mobile'. As most SEALORDS intelligence personnel will attest, the COMNAVFORV was a hands-on commander with new and innovative approaches to making the Navy a respected force in fighting the enemy. His thoughts and ideas were prolific in quantity and were the epitome of originality and quality. He was a man of "ideas" and gave the term "ZWI" ("Zumwalt's Wild Ideas") to his barrage of new approaches and plans. By the same token, if the ZWI was properly staffed and presented as 'not really very practical with flaws when analyzed', he would readily discard it and move on.

I remember a specific case where he had a ZWI to lift PBRs by heavy lift helo to Laos to interdict the infiltration into II Corps. The "then" ACOS (Plans), without any analysis stated in effect that this was a really crazy idea! He was relieved a month later. I mention this only to indicate WHY Gen Abrams thought so highly of Zumwalt who always thought "outside the box" but also his challenging his staff to prove that such was impractical or not "feasible"...or not "acceptable" (in planning terminology). The foregoing is related to state that the movement of activities, assets and personnel was a real challenge to all concerned. For example, it was not

unusual in a one year tour for a NILO to have more than one posting and to have to learn the personalities and idiosyncrasies of a whole new support environment.

#### Decentralization of Assets/Control and Supervision.

It was clear to COMNAVFORV and his N-2 and supported by the experience in PBRs and SWIFTS that the key to mobility and quick reaction was in providing authority to field echelons without having to be concerned with chains of command and logistic tails...or as is sometimes referred to as "management by exception". To implement this, all field intelligence officers were tied directly to the Force Commander who signed their orders and wrote their Fitness Reports. In those cases where officers were organic to the Task Force Commanders, they were provided concurrent Fitness Reports.

If "mobility" of assets were the 'sine qua non' of prosecuting SEALORDS, its handmaiden had to be in a real practical sense "the delegation of authority to the lowest competent echelon".

The traditional Navy is built on meticulous supervision and rightly so because the heart of naval warfare is catastrophic battles which are strategic, rather than 'tactical' in nature...(Trafalgar, Salamis, Midway). In the case of NAVINTFOV, we were in an insurgency, in which we had no traditions and really no 'modus operandi'. The "Cold War" required a certain level of intelligence support deemed 'essential' for naval offensive forces, especially for the Air Navy. In many cases, because of the "Draft", many young college graduates chose the Navy to perform their obligated service. For reasons *beyond the scope of this paper*, many very bright officers, having served a year or less in the operating Navy, requested or accepted an assignment to in-county Vietnam.

The situation/challenge for NAVINTFOV was simply that these Lt (jg) officers knew very little about the Navy (small unit operations), the VNN, the craft of intelligence, the intelligence field environment of CIA, Phoenix, Seals, Province Politics, Army operations/525 MI, VNN etc. Fortunately, the much criticized BUPERS sent outstanding experienced officers to the Coastal Zone and Riverine Intelligence Officer and LCDR billets including those like Kenny, Eaton, Barr, Carpenter, Murray, Ambrogi, Herriott, McMunn, Mullen(MACSO) ... and of course, LCDR Jack Graf being the prime example,( two tours, shot down twice, captured, killed during escape etc.) These experienced officers provided a resource to the NILOs and junior officers which permitted the COMNAVFORV to address situations involving other agencies, personality conflicts etc. NAVFORV N2 was always comfortable that the "independent" intelligence officer was being observed by the CTF, the CZIO/RAIO and the many other agency chiefs in the area to which he was accredited by CNFV's personal orders ... and was rarely 'blindsided' with an untoward event.

I am proud to have been associated with those brave and valiant officers and enlisted personnel who served in the NAVINTFOV... and the tribute to whom is now enshrined in the Navy Memorial on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

With warm regards,

Rex Rectanus