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March 1970

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THE VIETNAMESE NAVY

In June 1968, long before Vietnamese replacement of U.S. forces became a familiar concept worldwide as well as top policy in Saigon and Washington, gold-braided sailors in South Vietnam already were working out details of one part of the program. Long before the replacement timetable had become an issue for U.S. public debate, the brass of two navies agreed on a mid-1970 deadline for the turnover of most river and coastal craft and mid-1972 for the turnover of most of the remaining U.S. naval bases, assets and responsibilities in Vietnamese waters. To implement these decisions the U.S. Naval Command/Vietnam and the Vietnamese Navy launched an operation called ACTOV — «accelerated turnover to the Vietnamese.»

ACTOV is a blueprint for giving the Vietnamese Navy ultimate responsibility for «brown water navy» patrols along the Mekong Delta's waterways and blockades of the coasts. It will not affect the «blue-water navy» ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet far out on the «gunline» or those on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Since ACTOV was launched 17 months ago the U.S. Navy has given the Vietnamese Navy 242

crafts of varying sizes and types worth US\$68,300,000. It has turned over command of two of its bases to Vietnamese officers, instituted co-manning of operations at a fourth. It has helped to train more than 6,000 Vietnamese in the past nine months to meet exacting U.S. naval standards of operation. And it has added Vietnamese sailors to its own crews at such a rate that there is no U.S. combat vessel operating within Vietnamese waters today that has a completely American crew.

«ACTOV has been very successful so far», says Commodore Tran Van Chon, the Vietnamese Navy's Chief of Naval Operations. «We are taking over more and more each day. The turnover is very fast, but we can keep up with it. In fact, we are pleased it is so fast.»

October 1969 saw two change-of-flag ceremonies in Saigon — two of the five major and many smaller transfers of naval craft made under ACTOV so far. On October 10, 80 fiberglass PBR river patrol boats of the U.S. Navy (USN) worth US\$8,300,000 joined the Vietnamese Navy (VNN). They were augmented on October 31 by 13 larger PCF Swift boats valued at \$2,340,000. In the previous year 149

craft had changed hands, including LST landing ships, RAC river assault boats, repair and utility craft, and command control boats. Another 318 to 320 crafts remain to be turned over to the VNN under ACTOV, and many of them are having additional armament and more sophisticated radio and radar equipment installed.

Immediately after the October 31 ceremony the 13 new Swift boats — the VNN now has 33 — went north to join the coastal surveillance force sailing out of Qui Nhon, 423 kilometers northeast of Saigon. This base is part of a network established to prevent the landing of arms and men from North Vietnam on 1,600 kilometers of coastline. Called Operation Market Time, it has been so successful that officials say the source of supply from the North has largely dried up, forcing enemy supply and troop shipments to come overland.

On November 5, Qui Nhon's Coastal Surveillance Center and its facilities were handed over to the Vietnamese, with the VNN assuming full command. In June 1969 the coastal surveillance center at An Thoi, on Phu Quoc island in the Gulf of Thailand, had come under sole VNN command. And three other coastal surveillance centers — at Da Nang, Nha Trang and Vung Tau — are scheduled to be transferred to VNN command in the near future.

About one-third of the USN's Swift boats, speedy, well-armed craft that can remain at sea up to 36 hours at a time, are now in Vietnamese hands. Remaining under USN command for the present is the big Cam Ranh Bay coastal surveillance headquarters. «In the meantime,» says its commander, Captain John J. Shanahan of Task Force 115, «Vietnamese are joining the headquarters here. At a predetermined time there will be a Vietnamese officer sitting in this chair as commander of VNN Task Force 213, which will be responsible for coastal surveillance and counter-infiltration from the Demilitarized Zone in the north all the way down and around to the Cambodian border in the Gulf of Thailand.»

Also on schedule is the turnover

of assets and responsibilities of units plying the inland waterways of the Delta from Saigon to Ca Mau. After the October 10 change-of-flags ceremony in Saigon, the 80 PBRS were formed into four divisions of a new unit, VNN Task Force 212, and sent south to help keep the Delta's 8,000 kilometers of navigable rivers, tributaries and canals free of infiltrating Viet Cong. In June 1969 the Delta base of Ben Luc, 32 kilometers southwest of Saigon, had instituted co-manning of operations by Vietnamese and U.S. personnel. And on December 1 the My Tho naval base, also in the Delta 43 kilometers southwest of Saigon, was turned over to sole VNN command.

According to Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Vietnam, the current emphasis is on «combining U.S. and Vietnamese commands in all operational areas and shifting responsibilities as assets are transferred. Right now we are concentrating on modernizing and improving the Vietnamese Navy, and handing over enough assets to match situations in brown water navy operations. Existing bases will be upgraded and others will be constructed.»

Two Phases

By the time the first phase of ACTOV is completed in mid-1970, several more of the shore bases and their facilities will have been turned over to the Vietnamese and their operations placed under direct VNN command or joint VNN-USN command. By that time a large proportion of the scheduled total of about 560 U.S. crafts will be in Vietnamese hands, at least 350 of them patrolling inland waterways and the rest on Operation Market Time interception patrols off the coasts. These American vessels then will constitute one-third of the expanding VNN fleet. At present the 30,800-man Vietnamese Navy controls 1,143 vessels, including a junk fleet of 253 as

well as the 242 craft received so far from America.

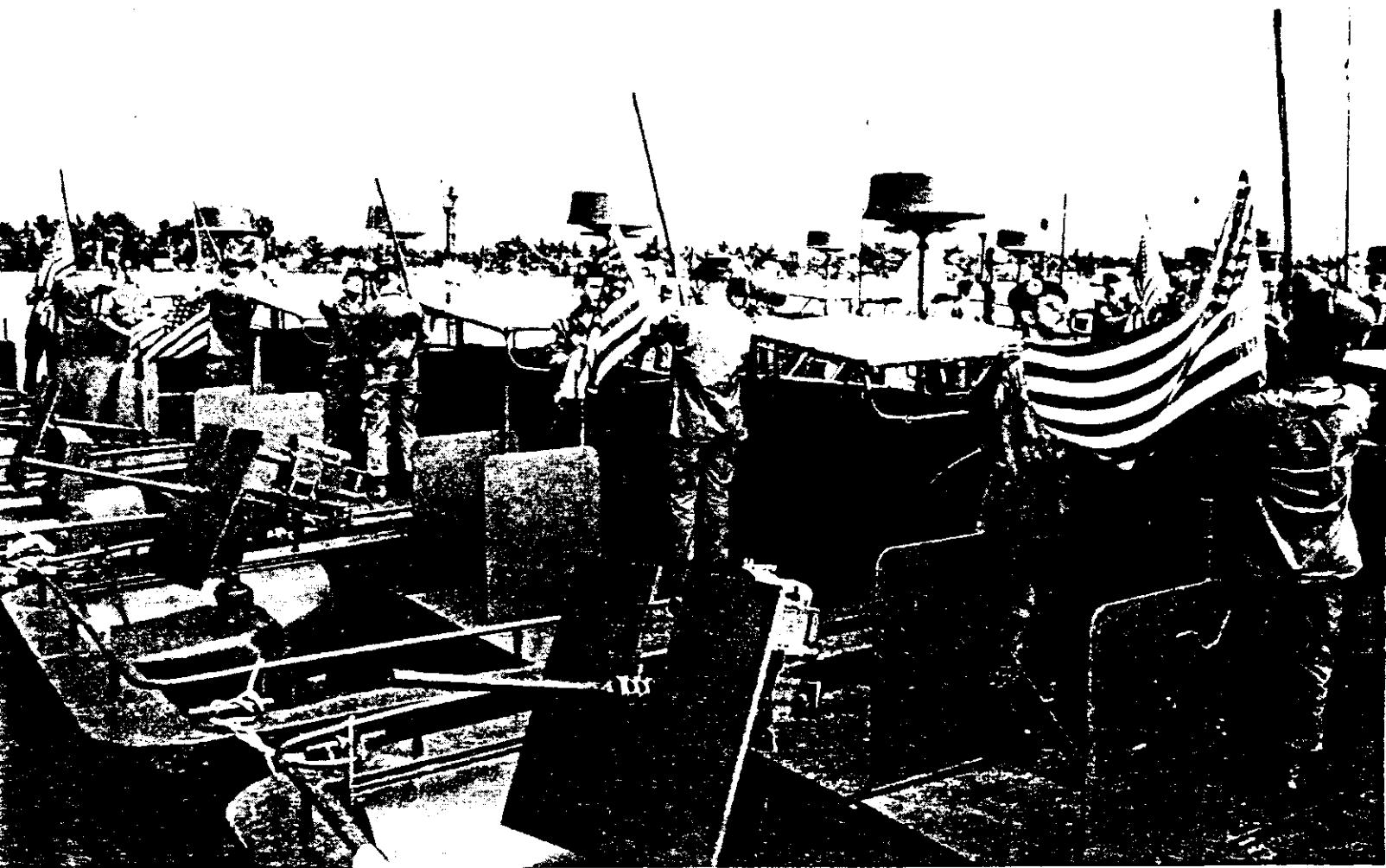
Each American vessel turned over to the VNN is commanded and manned by Vietnamese sailors, but each retains one USN adviser, usually a petty officer skilled in engine maintenance as well as small - boat combat tactics. Often the Vietnamese crew of a craft turned over to the VNN has received its training on that same craft, learning from the boat's original U.S. crewmen. A vital part of ACTOV's first phase is not only the customary training of Vietnamese at schools ashore, but on-the-job training averaging 12 weeks as members of the mixed crews manning U.S. craft. By June 1970 most VNN personnel — who by then are expected to total 5,000 officers and 28,000 men — are scheduled to have completed training.

The second phase of ACTOV, lasting through June 1972, will see the gradual turnover of command responsibility to the VNN as more and more of the USN's three dozen-odd shore bases. USN personnel will be reduced just as gradually, throughout both phases. Already 1,200 have gone home under the Pentagon's first shipment order, and 5,000 of the remaining 34,000 USN men are slated to return to the U.S. by the end of 1969 under the second shipment order. By June 1972 the VNN should be able to man, support, supply, maintain and command all craft and bases within Vietnamese waters. But a residual force of USN advisers is expected to remain at VNN bases and aboard vessels as long as necessary.

Navy Grows

By mid-1970 the VNN will be the 14th largest navy in the world in terms of personnel. Today's 30,800 officers and men represent an 80 percent increase in strength since 1966. The mid-1970 target strength of 33,121 — all volunteers — will be the result of a recruiting program that currently is seeing

VNN takes on more responsibilities



American flags are lowered prior to the raising of Vietnamese flags over PBR boats turned over to Vietnamese.

the induction of 1,000 to 1,200 naval trainees each month.

The Vietnamese Navy, born in 1952, was trained by the French until 1955. When the U.S. Navy took over training and advisory functions that year, the VNN was still an ineffective force of 14 ships, six river assault groups and a relative handful of trained officers. For six years training emphasized combat tactics and coastal blockades, and during those years the VNN grew to a force of 23 ships, 197 smaller crafts and 5,000 men.

In 1961 the training program was revamped. The forerunner of today's exacting program for a technically oriented navy, it was aimed not only at strengthening the river patrol and paramilitary junk forces, but at building an effective supply, logistics and maintenance network.

Today the VNN has the nucleus of that network. Performing well is Central Task Force 214, a combined force of one river transport escort group, one river assault

group and one river minesweeping group doing logistics, supply and maintenance work. The VNN in October 1969 established a logistics support command of public works and supply centers. Eventually it will take over from USN command seven support bases outside of Saigon, including Da Nang, Nha Be, Cam Ranh, Cat Lo, An Thoi, Binh Thuy and Dong Tam. And already the VNN operates one of the biggest shipyards in Southeast Asia. Situated on the Saigon waterfront, the 30-hectare yard has

a 175-meter drydock, the largest in the region, and is manned by 1,500 civilians and 500 trained seamen.

«The Vietnamese sailor has played a vital role and has been able to overcome many problems inherent in rapidly building a technically oriented navy,» says Admiral Zumwalt. «Aboard craft already turned over to the VNN, the performance of the sailors in a very few months has come close to approximating that of the U.S. Navy sailors. There is, of course, much training still to be accomplished before the individual sailor achieves the same operational competence of his American counterpart. But they are acquiring it rapidly.»

Since Admiral Zumwalt's arrival in September 1968 the on-the-job training program has expanded rapidly, and now each U.S. craft has its quota of Vietnamese sailors working and fighting side by side with American sailors. «In training,» says a U.S. Naval Command spokesman, «the Navy program is far ahead of all the other services. All of the 34,000 U.S. naval personnel in Vietnam are involved in some aspect of ACTOV.»

Training School

With the ranks of Vietnamese naval personnel expanding and the June 1970 training deadline approaching, training centers ashore have also accelerated their programs. Fifteen thousand sailors have been graduated from the three specialist schools, the Naval Training Schools at Saigon, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay. Of that number, 4,086 have been trained just since January 1969. In that same nine-month period instructors at Nha Trang have been busy: the Naval Academy graduated 100, the Petty Officer School 303, and the Warrant Officer School 303, and the Warrant Officer School 61. In Saigon, the Small Boat School and the Advanced English-language School turned out about 1,000. In Da Nang, USN Seabees are training 383 Vietnamese sailors in construction work, and a program to train Vietnamese SEALS (unconventional warfare experts) is being developed. Meanwhile, 32 Vietnamese officers and 216 enlisted men

14th largest navy in personnel by '70

are studying at naval schools in the United States.

The Naval Academy will graduate its next class of 271 ensigns in April 1970. The current course is 44 weeks. The Academy graduated its first class of seven in 1952 after a 24-month course given to Vietnamese who were midshipmen in the French Navy when they started training. In 1965 the course was reduced to 18 months and the class increased to 100 officer-trainees. The 44-week course was instituted in April 1969 to enable more than 270 to be trained at a time.

The three specialist schools, jointly established by the VNN and the USN commands, have instructors from both navies teaching all aspects of boat work and seamanship, maintenance, logistics, radio and engineering skills. Twelve hundred sailors currently are in training at Cam Ranh Bay, 850 at Nha Trang and 550 at Saigon. Courses vary in length from three to 12 weeks, depending on the subject.

Outside the normal training structure, created just for ACTOV, is Saigon's small boat school. It is operated by the U.S. Navy in consultation with an American firm called International Training Consultants (ITC). The school's director is Bernard Donohue, a retired U.S. Navy officer who saw action on the Cua Viet River in the north and on the Delta's waterways. ITC personnel have trained the 65 U.S. Navy instructors at the school, and they in turn are training 2,000 Vietnamese sailors every 18 months.

The students come to the school after boot camp at the army-operated Van Kiep National Training Center near Vung Tau, where they receive six weeks of basic training and three weeks of naval orientation. At the small boat school they

take a 12-week course in the basics of seamanship, including 20 hours aboard the school's two training PBRs, plus English-language lessons stressing familiarity with naval terms.

All students at the small boat school, except for the few selected for specialist training or for instruction at Saigon's advanced English-language school, are destined to become crewmembers on craft in the Delta's waterways (the majority) or on coastal surveillance craft in Operation Market Time. From the school the graduates go to U.S. vessels for their on-the-job training. Once aboard, each trainee has an American counterpart. When the river group's commander considers the Vietnamese sailor qualified — usually after 12 weeks — his U.S. counterpart leaves the vessel. Gradually the proportion of Vietnamese sailors on each craft increases as the Americans one by one are reassigned or sent home, until finally the craft and its crew are ready to be turned over to the VNN.

To prepare the Vietnamese for this on-the-job training, 70 percent of the small boat school's curriculum is devoted to the study of 1,500 words of the English language — enough, say the instructors, to enable the sailor to follow instructions. Those needing a better command of the language — such as men sent to the United States for special training — go on to the advanced English-language school.

The small boat school, says director Donohue, is «a one-shot deal,» designed to meet ACTOV's requirements. Training standards are not high, yet 50 percent graduate below standards. Absenteeism is high — about 15 percent. But as a temporary expedient the school is performing a valuable function, enabling thousands to take jobs aboard crafts in combat — and that is where the real training

VNN morale is high

starts.

•Often a poor classroom sailor makes a good practical sailor, says Donohue. •Less often it's the other way around.

On the Job

One place the trainees may go is Nha Be, a strategically situated U.S. naval base on the 72-kilometer-long shipping channel from Vung Tau to Saigon. There 52 USN sailors of River Division 593 now are training 21 recent graduates of the small boat school. This PBR group will be one of the last to be transferred to Vietnamese control, for its men are skilled in on-the-job training. From Nha Be the Vietnamese go on to specialist school or are assigned to a VNN division.

The commander of 593, Lieutenant Laurence Bissonnette, says 50 Vietnamese have been trained by his men since March and all are well qualified and capable of taking their place in any small boat. But one of Bissonnette's instructors — a young gunner two years in Vietnam and a veteran of the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong River fighting of December 1968, when PBR crews suffered 80 percent casualties in two months — believes the training pace is too fast.

•The trainees come to us with little knowledge of boat work, he says. •Most of them don't want to come to the PBRs in the first place. These craft are fiberglass; they don't have any armor plating at all. We patrol all the small canals and waterways, and we get shot at. The trainee really needs just a little more time with us before he's ready for assignment to a VNN division.»

Most of his shipmates agree the Vietnamese generally are too young and inexperienced to be expected to become sailors overnight, but most agree that the average Vietnamese can be trained, and well trained, if patience is employed

and motivation is nurtured.

Commodore Chon believes his men will be able to shoulder their additional responsibilities even in the final phase of ACTOV when all U.S. assets are turned over to VNN control.

•We feel strong,» says the VNN's top officer. •Morale is high among our men now as they receive more of the facilities they need to do their jobs.»

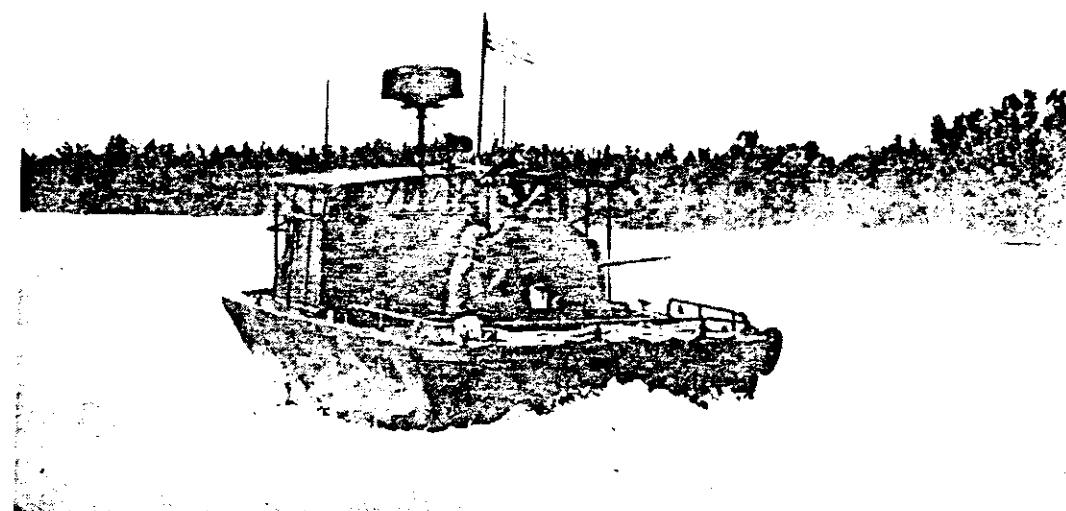
Commodore Chon plans to revamp curricula at the three specialist training schools to include refresher courses for specialists. If the level of combat remains unchanged he plans to train more of his men in psychological operations and civic action work with villagers. Already his sailors are conducting a number of successful operations in this field. •Our units, he says, •are carrying out some 150 psychological operations — ranging from civic action projects to propaganda broadcasts — every month.» One civic action project is the operation of two hospital

ships treating the local people as well as naval casualties. One is anchored at My Tho now and the other works out of the new Seafloat base on the Ca Mau peninsula. •It's new,» says Commodore Chon, •but already 4,829 civilians in the Ca Mau area have received medical treatment from Vietnamese Navy men.»

More Responsibilities

Along with training of sailors and transfer of assets to the VNN, ACTOV entails the progressive turnover to the Vietnamese of areas of tactical responsibility. Today VNN-controlled crafts are responsible for about 58 percent of the naval patrols in the Mekong Delta. In two major areas — the Ca Mau peninsula and the upper reaches of the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong Rivers — Vietnamese sailors are almost solely responsible for security.

In 1952 the French handed over to the Vietnamese 120 weary wood-and steel-hulled boats and a tactical concept of water-borne infantry assault. The Vietnamese took these and built a flotilla of mobile assault gunboats. Manned by spirited crews, for 14 years they bore the full weight of the job of



Coastal surveillance craft sailing out of Qui Nhon check boat traffic to prevent infiltration by the enemy.



Gunnery class at Naval Training School at Cam Ranh Bay. VNN gunners open fire on Viet Cong sniper positions.

trying to break the Viet Cong stranglehold on the Delta's waterways. Their RAGs — eight River Assault Groups — worked out of four bases along the Mekong and Bassac Rivers, carrying Vietnamese troops into VC-held areas, delivering them to their objective, maneuvering them in battle, and supporting them with resupply missions, medical evacuation and fire power from the water.

In 1966 the 1,200 embattled Vietnamese sailors of the RAGs got help from the Americans. The Mobile Riverine Force, composed of 3,000 men from both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army, moved into the Delta as an assault force with four missions — destroy the enemy, neutralize enemy bases, inter-

dict enemy supply and transit routes, and support rural construction programs. The MRF had about 120 boats, most of them converted from the old LCM-6 (landing craft, medium). Some were fitted out as armored landing craft, some as monitor gunboats (the battleships of the Delta) and some as fast little patrol boats. Supported by helicopters, they transported Army battalions to the enemy's doorstep.

Between them, however, the Vietnamese and the Americans could patrol only about 4,000 kilometers of Delta waterways, all that are navigable to their vessels. Light, high-riding sampans can move on some 40,000 kilometers, and much of the Viet Cong traffic was by sampan. Then the

PBR came to Vietnam. The first of these river patrol boats was evolved from a nine-meter fiberglass pleasure boat with 12-inch draft and special water-jet engines. Introduction of the surface-skimming craft — it now can move on only six inches of water — opened up another 4,000 kilometers of tributaries to the allies. With its speed of more than 20 knots, its radar equipment and its armament of 50-caliber machine guns and grenade launchers, the PBR is one of the Navy's best shallow-draft combat weapons.

About 150 of the PBRs were assigned to Task Force 116 and Operation Game Warden was launched. «Before we got here,» said the task force's first command-

der, «the VC had the use of the waterways that was just about as close to 100 percent as possible. Our job, put simply, was stopping resupply of VC battalions in the Delta and ending unrestricted enemy use of the rivers.» Operating from six shore bases and three anchored LSTs, the PBRs daily and nightly combed the Bassac River, the mighty Mekong and its three branches that empty into the South China Sea: the Ham Luong, the My Tho and the Co Chien. Spot checks on river traffic involved stopping some 5,000 to 6,000 people a day. And these people as time went on volunteered more and more information about the Viet Cong. Now the local people use the canals and rivers without fear of Viet Cong harassment, and trade is booming.

39 Divisions

Today the 18 U.S. river divisions of 240 craft and the 15 Vietnamese RAGs and six RAIDs (River Assault and Interdiction Division) patrol every meter of South Vietnam's navigable waterways. The U.S. and Vietnamese activities have been coordinated under the command of SEALORDS (Southeast Asia lake, ocean, river, delta strategy) since October 1968. It has three objectives to stop infiltration of VC and supplies from the Cambodian border area; to penetrate areas long held by the enemy, and to erect an effective barrier against infiltration stretching from Ca Mau to Tay Ninh.

Last November a three-phased operation, called Interdiction by the Americans and Tran Hung Dao by the Vietnamese, jumped off to stop enemy supply and troop movements in the area from Ha Tien in Kien Giang province to Tay Ninh, 400 kilometers to the north. In the first phase Vietnamese and U.S. PCF Swift boats and PBRs moved along two waterways from Ha Tien to Chau Doc paralleling the Cambodian border.

«When we first went into the area,» says a U.S. spokesman, «the people were flying Viet Cong flags and most had never seen a U.S. sailor before. They had been under enemy domination as long as they could remember. Our patrols had to be a combination of combat,

psychological operations and civic action work with the villagers.»

The second phase of the operation came in December 1968 when Vietnamese and U.S. Swift boats moved from Ben Luc into the upper Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong Rivers. Working closely with units of the First U.S. Air Cavalry Division, they scoured the waterways and put troops ashore to patrol the area where the two rivers form a giant slingshot as they come together. Today Vietnamese sailors are almost solely responsible for this operation. They control most of the gunboat operations and soon will start PBR patrols.

The final phase of Operation Interdiction/Tran Hung Dao was launched in January 1969 when PBRs and armored assault craft moved into the 90-kilometer-long canal complex stretching across the Plain of Reeds. As more craft are turned over to the VNN, more of this operation is becoming a Vietnamese responsibility.

Tran Hung Dao III

The most recent combined Vietnamese-U.S. operation is Tran Hung Dao III, or Seafloat. Launched in June 1969, this operation is headquartered at an advanced tactical support base of floating barges towed to an anchorage on the Cua Long River, on the Ca Mau peninsula, 320 kilometers southwest of Saigon. Long a Viet Cong sanctuary, the area years ago had seen its population of fishermen and woodcutters desert if for refuge in government-held towns. But as the sailors of both navies demonstrated they intended to stay, and as a Vietnamese Navy hospital ship dropped anchor at Seafloat as a warrant of that intention, the people started to come back. So far 2,000 fishermen and woodcutters have resettled in the area and have resumed their traditional occupations. «I've seen at least 500 junks plying the river near here,» said Commodore Chon during an inspection tour. «Before Seafloat was established and the Viet Cong were cleaned out of the area, such river traffic would have been impossible.» More than 2,000 enemy troops have been killed and nearly 500 tons of enemy weapons,

munitions and supplies have been captured or destroyed by Seafloat patrols. Now the Vietnamese and Americans are building on the shore near the anchored barges what will be the VNN's largest brown water navy base when it is finished in April 1970.

Soon to become under sole Vietnamese control is the Rung Sat Special Zone. Almost 97 percent of supplies coming to Vietnam arrive by sea — one-third of them destined for Saigon. All ships coming to Saigon must traverse the 72-kilometer Long Tao shipping channel through the Rung Sat or «killer forest» north of Vung Tau. During high tide the area is 75 percent underwater. There are no roads, and the forest's 18,000 inhabitants must use sampans for all travel. Cargo ships heading for Saigon on the channel have been a special target for Viet Cong gunners and frogmen hiding in the forest.

In August 1969 the Mobile Riverine Force of U.S. Navy and U.S. Army assault units was disbanded. Some 110 PBRs, assault boats and troop carriers were turned over to the Vietnamese and the VNN Amphibious Task Force 211 was commissioned. The three units in the task force each have two RAID divisions and one Vietnamese Marine battalion. Task Force 211 — or the Great Green Fleet, as it is called — soon will have 70 more boats and three more RAIDs will be formed. The Great Green Fleet's task is to keep the Rung Sat area free of infiltrating Viet Cong and to keep the vital Long Tao channel open to shipping. Since they assumed that responsibility only one ship has been rocketed, 135 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army men have been killed and 65 captured. Rising defections from the ranks of local Communists — 60 turned themselves in during one recent week — testify that the Great Green Fleet has seized the balance of power.

«Their success in these and other operations from the 17th to the 10th parallels,» says a U.S. naval observer, «demonstrates that the Vietnamese sailors have the capability of assuming more and more responsibility as they receive more of the U.S. Navy's assets.»

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