

Interview Number 1 with Captain Howard J. Kerr, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

Place: Captain Kerr's home in Vienna, Virginia

Date: Wednesday, 22 September 1982

Subject: Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

Interviewer: Paul Stillwell

Q: This is one of a series of interviews being conducted with those who served with Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr., to get added perspective on his life and career in the naval service.

Captain, before we get to covering your service with Admiral Zumwalt himself, could you start please by providing a little background on your service career prior to that?

Captain Kerr: I enlisted in the Navy in 1960, following graduation from the University of Iowa, and proceeded to the Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, where I was graduated and commissioned in December of 1960. Following that, I served successive tours in the carrier Bon Homme Richard and the destroyer Walke. I then joined the staff of Cruiser-Destroyer-Flotilla Nine and in September of 1966 was assigned to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in a postgraduate program in political science/international relations.

I spent two years at the Fletcher School, and it was upon the completion of this tour that I first served with Admiral Zumwalt as

his flag secretary and aide when he was assigned as Commander U.S. Naval Forces in Vietnam in late 1968.

Q: What led you to seek a degree in political science?

Captain Kerr: Well, I always had a deep interest in national security issues, even while I was in college. These had been reinforced during my preceding six years in the Navy until that time. This program which was available to me seemed to fit very nicely with not only my interests, but also with a career path that I saw at that time. So I made application for this specific program, was accepted, and as I said, matriculated at the Fletcher School in September of 1966.

Q: What was the focus of your efforts there?

Captain Kerr: Well, the focus of my efforts there was, the first year was international economic policy, for which I received a master of arts degree. The second year was national policy planning with a basis in international law, for which I received a master of arts in law and diplomacy. I think it's the only school that gives that kind of degree. Fletcher is jointly administered by Tufts and Harvard. And so many of our courses were at the Kennedy School, particularly the second year when we were focusing more on national policy planning.

Dr. Kissinger was still a member of the staff at Harvard, and he taught a course on national policy planning which many of us took at that time.* In 1967 I was a member of his year-long class and, of course, there was a great deal of interest in the Vietnam War at that time. As a master's thesis, I decided to write about the Vietnam War, or I should say about the period that led up to the escalation of our involvement. So I selected the period of 1950 to 1962. That period encompasses the time frame in which we were represented in country by a military advisory assistance group, or a MAAG, as opposed to the military assistance command or the MACV. That organizational change in 1962 represented a significant organizational change, which was necessary to support a larger military involvement. So it seemed to me that was a good breaking point. I wrote about the period just following the outbreak of the Korean War, which changed America's thinking tremendously in the Pacific and resulted in an increase in concern about Communist thrusts into Southeast Asia. At that time, as you recall, the French were, I guess you might say, the Western powers' influence or colonialists' hangover of Southeast Asia. They were still there.

Well, to conclude this, I think that our response in Vietnam was driven to a great extent by our perceptions of what had happened in Korea. We moved to assist the French, and when the French failed, the

*Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, who served as special assistant to President Richard Nixon for national security affairs from 1969 to 1973 and as U.S. Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977.

United States moved in. We established a MAAG, and our military involvement began.

I decided to look at that to see if that period would be instructive in understanding the escalation of our effort in the Sixties. So the title of my thesis was "The U.S. In Vietnam, 1949 to 1962: An Instrument Of U.S. Involvement." Basically, I concluded that during that period, the dominant influence, or the dominant instrument in U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia was driven by military interests and military concerns far more than economic and political. In other words, the military concerns were dominant and they overrode, to a great extent, what should have been more of a balanced mix in terms of our perception of Vietnam and our perception of what our interests were in Vietnam.

So I saw a pattern to the buildup after '62 with the creation of the MACV that was just a continuation of American policy, as opposed to a major change in American policy in 1962 under Kennedy.* It was really just a continuum. It was an escalation of that policy, and the increase of U.S. presence was a dramatic change in terms of numbers and the impact that those numbers were to have. But essentially our presence had been dominant in Vietnam through the decade of the Fifties. I guess historians will argue whether or not Kennedy's increase in the number of advisors in 1962 and the creation of a MACV represented a commitment that he was prepared to see through to

*John F. Kennedy, U.S. President from 1961 to 1963.

eventually what we had was 500,000 or whether he would have cut it off at some point in time. But, in my judgment, the decision to create a MACV in 1962, to increase the number of advisors, was a continuum of policy that commenced with the invasion of Korea by the Chinese in 1950, the defeat of the French, and our concern that Communism was on the march in Asia, and the United States had to create a presence there to stop that. We saw it with a compromise solution in Korea with the establishment of the 38th parallel. We saw it in South Vietnam with the creation of two Vietnams, the one Communist and the other so-called democratic. I wrote that paper for the Kissinger seminar that I was attending in national policy planning.

I was under orders at the time to go to Vietnam to take command of one of the PG boats that was assigned to the Market Time operations, stationed out of Camranh Bay.* I was leaving Fletcher in the late summer months.

I got a call from a friend of mine in Washington who told me that an Admiral Zumwalt had just been named the new commander in Vietnam. I had remembered Admiral Zumwalt from San Diego. He had been the commander of a cruiser-destroyer-flotilla there when I was on the Flotilla Nine staff. I never worked for him and never met him professionally or socially, but knew of him, knew of his reputation in

*Market Time was the name assigned to the mission and forces of the U.S. Navy's Task Force 115 off the coast of South Vietnam. Its intent was to intercept enemy forces seeking to infiltrate weapons and equipment into South Vietnam. A PG was a gas turbine-powered patrol gunboat, then new to the U.S. Navy.

San Diego.

This friend of mine told me that the admiral was putting together a staff and knew that I was going to Vietnam and wondered if it would be all right for him to mention my name to the admiral as a possible candidate to be on his staff.

I told him that, "Well, I have these orders to take command of this ship, but if you want to give my name to Admiral Zumwalt that is fine."

Well, he apparently did. I don't recall exactly now the exact chain of events, but one evening I was at home in Boston doing some reading and I got a phone call from Admiral Zumwalt. He asked me point-blank if I would like to come to Vietnam with him and be on his personal staff.

I told him at the time that I had orders to command this PG, and I felt it would be impossible for me to turn a command down to accept a staff job, notwithstanding the fact that it would be on his personal staff.

Q: Well, in view of what you had told your friend earlier, that you had expressed some interest, why then the change?

Captain Kerr: Well, just that I had thought through the equation a little bit more and decided that I really didn't want to turn down a command tour.

Q: What was your rank at that point?

Captain Kerr: I was a lieutenant.

Q: A ship command is a real plum for a lieutenant.

Captain Kerr: Yes, it was. At that time it was considered a real plum for a lieutenant.

So, anyway after I'd hung up the phone, I went back and I was reading The New York Times, and I got to about the middle of the first section of the Times, and my eye caught this article that said that the Navy had just named the youngest three-star admiral in its history and that he was going to Vietnam to take command of U.S. naval forces in country.*

I put the paper down, and I thought through that a little bit and I told my wife that I thought I had just made a big mistake. She wanted to know why, and I told her about the phone call and told her about the article in the paper. I said, "I think I'll make a few phone calls tomorrow, and I may reconsider that decision."

Well, I did make some phone calls. I talked to a couple of flag

*When used in connection with the U.S. Navy's participation in the Vietnam War, the term "in country" refers to duty ashore in Vietnam or in Task Forces 115, 116, and 117--all under Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam. Not under ComNavForV were the elements of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The brief newspaper item appeared in The New York Times, 26 July 1968, page 38.

officers that I had worked for. Each of them, without hesitation, strongly urged me to call Admiral Zumwalt and see if that job was still available and take it, as opposed to the command.

As one admiral put it, there's lots of opportunities to command. These PGs are not that significant, but the opportunity to work for and to watch and to learn from Admiral Zumwalt would be of almost inestimable significance to me in terms of my career. It would be almost literally a training opportunity that one couldn't pass up, plus it would expose me to, not only to him, but to an awful lot of senior people in the Navy, which is important in a young officer's career.

Q: Did you find out why Admiral Zumwalt was interested in you individually?

Captain Kerr: Well, I can only assume the admiral must have called the Bureau and asked for my record, which is the usual pattern.* But I think that his primary interest was that I was at the Fletcher School and that the admiral understood that to get to the Fletcher School, you had to go through a fairly significant filtering process in the Navy to begin with. To graduate from the Fletcher School, you had to have demonstrated a certain amount of intelligence and ability

*Bureau--the Bureau of Naval Personnel, which then handled assignments of naval officers.

to think and write and speak. And he was looking for somebody like that. And, also, I don't know if he had read, but he had been briefed in essence on the paper that I had done. So there was a connection with what I had been doing in the last year. The Kissinger seminar, while it focused on the world, that particular year a great deal of the emphasis was on our current policy in Vietnam, where we dissected it and exposed it and talked about it.

Q: Things were starting to unravel by 1968 as far as public opinion and whether the war could be won. Was any of this reflected in your study on whether it was a worthwhile effort?

Captain Kerr: No, except in my own conclusions of that, I made it clear that in Vietnam where we had failed was that we had too much of a military bias in our effort and that it was a situation that required, first of all, to really understand the character of the situation there and the real nature of that war and required a very sophisticated application of economic, political, as well as military effort. And that over the years the military had been the dominant influence, and it had continued to be the dominant influence in Vietnam. And as a result of that, I felt that the war and our effort there simply could not win with such a dominant military influence unless, of course, we wanted to unleash the military completely, a la World War II. Then there was no doubt in my mind but what we would

end the situation in a hurry. But the military was always going to be restricted in Vietnam, and with that restriction you then really needed a very, very careful balance, as I said, a mixture of the political, the economic, and the military. I'm not so sure in retrospect that it was ever winnable in those circumstances. But those are the kinds of conclusions that college students write about in papers, and I was no exception to that.

Q: Well, what happened then when you reconsidered?

Captain Kerr: I called the admiral back and told him that I had thought about his offer and that my response had been a kind of a knee-jerk one. I told him also that I had read the article in The New York Times, and that had influenced me considerably and if he was still interested in my joining him, I would be delighted to do so.

He said, "Fine. You will have to contact the bureau and tell them that you do not want this command."

So, I did that. That was not an easy thing. The Bureau of Naval Personnel, in its usual highly structured way, had decided that a command at this point in my career was the most important thing, and the fact that they had said so made it almost theological, and therefore undoing it was heretical.

We went through a number of phone calls. I had to sign in blood that I had, in fact, turned down a command tour and violated all the

tenets of the religion that dominated the Bureau of Personnel at that time. Eventually, they agreed to change my orders, telling me that I was making the biggest mistake of my career, that one never turns down a command in the Navy, that I was in line for an executive officer's tour after that of a missile ship, and I would probably not get that. That I was probably giving up early selection to lieutenant commander. And, although it wasn't said to me directly, but through another party, the word of the bureau was that there were a lot of people in Washington who were delighted to see Zumwalt leave town, and where best to send him than off to Vietnam? So that I was really tying myself up with somebody that was on the way out, rather than on his way up. So, for all those reasons, I was buying into a stock that I ought to be selling short on rather than waiting for the up-side.

So, with that barrage of opposition to my decision, I called the admiral back and told him that I wasn't finding much support at the bureau for joining his staff, but nonetheless I intended to do so, and when did he want me to start to work.

He said, "Friday, in San Diego."

As I recall, this was a Tuesday, and I was in Boston. Well, I met him in the airport in San Diego on a Friday morning. He and his family arrived there, and he was commencing a series of briefings that were to last, as I recall, about three weeks. The major commands in California, as well as some of the training commands that were training people that were going to Vietnam. We went out to Pearl

Harbor and then to the Philippines and eventually on to Saigon.

Q: Did he get briefed by CinCPac and CinCPacFlt in Pearl?*

Captain Kerr: Yes, there were also meetings with the type commanders in San Diego. The most significant one in terms of the job he was going to was then the Amphibious Force Commander--Vice Admiral Smith was his name--because he owned the amphibious assets in country.** He was responsible, as the type commander, for the maintenance and the training and all the support for those boats that were attached to the 117 operation, that is the armored personnel boats, the Game Warden and the 116, the Swift boats, the PBRs.*** Swift boats were the Market Time operations. Other than the minesweepers and the destroyers, Phib had everything in country. He was the type commander for them, so we went there, and we had a series of briefings there.

What I did basically in those briefings was to take notes, record particularly the admiral's questions and the answers to his questions

*CinCPac--Commander in Chief Pacific, a joint U.S. command with responsibility for all military activities in the Pacific theater, headed by a four-star Navy admiral; CinCPacFlt--Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet, another four-star Navy admiral who is responsible for only the naval activities in the Pacific theater.

**Vice Admiral John Victor Smith, USN, whose oral history is in the Naval Institute collection.

***Task Force 116 (Game Warden) comprised fast river patrol boats (PBRs) which operated on major rivers in South Vietnam to enforce curfews and regulations of the government; Task Force 117 (Mobile Riverine Force) was made up of Navy landing craft converted to armored troop carriers and gunfire support vessels. They worked with U.S. Army units to conduct attacks from the rivers onto land.

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and then draft up memorandums for the record that afternoon or evening, whenever I had a chance, get them typed up so that we kept a file of the significant aspects of the briefing, the points that were being made, the questions asked. What I'm getting at is that a pattern of supporting the admiral began to evolve. He'd leave them with a series of questions that he wanted answers to that maybe they didn't have. My job was to record those questions and be aware of the fact that he didn't get the answers to them. And then watch for those answers, and if they weren't forthcoming, to go back to that action officer to make sure that they were forthcoming.

I went with him to MinePac (Commander Mine Forces Pacific) in Long Beach and went through the same procedure there. We then went up to San Francisco. There was a lot of training going on up at Mare Island. We went up there, and then we went out to Pearl Harbor.

Q: What was your specific billet on the staff at that point?

Captain Kerr: Well, at that point I was his aide and flag secretary. We'll see as we get into this, I never really functioned as a flag secretary at all.

We went out to Pearl Harbor. I guess the most significant thing about the flight out was that the admiral's orders read that upon departure of the continental United States, he was authorized to assume the title and wear the insignia of vice admiral, United States

Navy. So I had purchased some insignia. I had contacted United Airlines that we were flying to Pearl Harbor and told them about this. I told them as soon as they lifted off and turned off the no smoking sign that we intended to have this frocking ceremony on board this DC-8.* I told them it was probably a first for United Airlines.

So they got behind it and supported a big party on the airplane for us, champagne for everyone, and they had a cake for the admiral. My wife and his wife pinned the three stars on his khaki uniform, and we had a delightful flight over to Pearl Harbor. We got there and went through a series of briefings at CinCPac as well as CinCPacFlt.

Q: What sort of guidance was included there?

Captain Kerr: Well, I don't recall specifically that there was so much guidance presented as there was just an overview of the war as they saw it at that time.

CinCPacFlt's focus was, of course, the Tonkin Gulf, carrier operations. They paid very little attention to what was going on in country; it was really an insignificant part of the war as far as they were concerned. My impression at the time was that while they didn't look upon it with disdain, it was just sort of an adjunct to what the

*In the Navy the term "frocking" refers to the practice of donning the uniform insignia and assuming the title of a higher rank before actually being promoted to it. The promotion would come when Admiral Zumwalt took command in Vietnam.

major war was. The Navy's major involvement was carrier operations in support of the war.

CinCPac, on the other hand, as you would suspect, gave more of a "purple-suiter" approach to the thing.* They discussed all the operations that were going on in country and, of course, touched on Seventh Fleet operations. But they were more concerned about what was happening in country than CinCPacFlt. That merely reflects what the missions were.

But, it was really at CincPac that we got more of an understanding and briefing of what was going on in country--what the Navy was doing in country. In other words, we had 38,000 troops, sailors, at that time in Vietnam--not an insignificant number of forces.

I don't recall right now anything specific about what was said about the Navy, what it was doing. All I have is sort of a generalized recollection of subsequent discussions that I had with the admiral about what was happening, which I believe reflected his thinking at the time, which was a product of not only what he had learned in Washington, but also what he had picked up privately from the major commanders that he talked to prior to getting to Vietnam. And that was that the Navy was underutilized. We had evolved into a

*As a Navy-only command, CinCPacFlt would take essentially a "blue-suiter" approach. CinCPac, as a joint command involving all U.S. military services, would have a broader outlook. "Purple-suiter" is a slang reference to the idea that if the colors of the uniforms of the various services were blended, as the services are supposed to be blended in a joint-service command, the resulting color would be purple.

pattern of static operations, the impact of which had denied the major rivers to the Vietnamese and had interdicted most of his operations along the coast of South Vietnam. Nevertheless--given the nature of the infiltration into South Vietnam, particularly in the IV Corps area through Cambodia--we really weren't having much of an impact in terms of supporting the overall war effort there.* Where most U.S. Navy forces were, in the IV Corps, there was a sense that we needed to bring together the three forces that were there in some sort of coordinated effort to involve those forces in the war effort more, a more creative, innovative way to support that effort.

The commander who was there at the time, Admiral Veth, for whatever reasons, had been unable to supply the kind of leadership and innovation in this area that would satisfy a man like Abrams.**

Q: Could you pinpoint where this direction was coming from to be more involved?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think, first of all, General Abrams was obviously unhappy with Admiral Veth. He saw 38,000 forces under one of his component commanders, and he couldn't see them being employed

*South Vietnam had been divided into four military zones, ranging from north to south; I Corps (commonly pronounced "Eye Corps") was the northernmost, and IV Corps (pronounced "Four Corps") was the farthest south.

**Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, USN, Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam prior to Admiral Zumwalt.

in such a way that was supporting the war effort.

Secondly, they were obviously costing the Navy a great deal to maintain those forces there; 38,000 people had to be supplied. All those boats. I don't think the institutional Navy had a strong sense that we should be there. Riverine warfare, in country--somehow that was the Army's responsibility. That was the Marines' responsibility. The Navy should be to seaward. So it was a drag on the Navy. So in the Navy sense they shouldn't be there to begin with, but we are there, and we're not going to remove ourselves, so we ought to be involved somehow.

Q: Admiral Veth had two stars. Now, Admiral Zumwalt came in with three stars. Was there a significance in that change?

Captain Kerr: Yes, I think there was a significance in that change for a number of reasons. Number one, all the component commanders under General Abrams, were three stars. In fact, the Air Force was four stars. His Army commanders under him were all three stars. And then you had the Navy with a component commander with two stars. So right away, he was not at the same level as his contemporaries, his peers. And then that worked right down through the chain of command in the Navy. Our task force commanders were captains; the equivalent of that in the Army would have been brigadier or major generals. So

the Navy was downgraded in the eyes of the whole MACV structure.* In a structure dominated by the Army, rank was very important.

Q: Is it a fair presumption that Admiral Veth would have been upgraded to three stars if he had been satisfying General Abrams?

Captain Kerr: That's my understanding. But at some point, the Navy was going to upgrade that job to three stars; Veth had been promised that if he went to Vietnam, eventually he would come out of three as a three-star admiral, but he didn't.

Admiral Zumwalt did receive the third star. Of course, there was tension that resulted from his arriving in country as a three-star admiral, whereas the outgoing commander was still two stars.

But before we get to Vietnam, let me go back a little bit and just close off the period of time prior to getting in country. We finished off the briefings in Pearl Harbor, and then we flew to Clark Air Force Base.** During this entire period, the admiral's family was with him, because they were transiting to Clark Air Force Base, where they were going to live while he was stationed in Vietnam.

We got to Clark, and we had, as I recall, some discussions there with the Air Force people. The most significant thing we did was go

*MACV--U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, which was commanded by General Abrams, was a joint-service organization.

**Clark Air Force Base is on the island of Luzon in the Philippines.

over to Subic Bay, where we had some briefings from the commanders there. But, then the admiral and I went through survival training together in the jungles not too far outside of the naval base in Subic. The program was to set you down in the middle of the jungle. We had a machete, and that was it. We had Maguire, a small Negroid Filipino. And the admiral and I proceeded to survive in the jungle with this young man's skills. Without him I don't know what we would have done. We found that you could make coffee from nuts that fell off trees. That you could reach in amidst a tangled bunch of vines and find one that had fresh water in it. We found how to fish, without poles or string, in streams. And we had some very good meals and exercised a great deal in our days that we were there. Really, it was the training that the pilots went through as opposed to the training that the surface people went through in a base outside of San Diego before they went to Vietnam.

Q: Did you get any POW training--how to behave if captured?

Captain Kerr: Yes, but just some discussion and lectures. We were told what to expect. I don't recall it as being extensive. This whole training was truncated because of the admiral's schedule.

We finished up in Subic, and then we flew to Saigon in an Air

Force T-39 from Clark Air Force Base one day, just the admiral and I.* I remember the trip over to Saigon. The admiral was a little pensive and philosophical about beginning this new tour. He was, as you know, at that time the youngest vice admiral in the history of the Navy. He had jumped over an awful lot of people. That had created strains. I didn't appreciate all those at the time. Those strains actually represented themselves sometimes in terms of bitterness on the part of others. He was going to an area in which no flag officer who had gone there ahead of him had been able to translate that into anything significant, either for himself personally or for the Navy, for that matter. The impression we had was that he had a second-class staff in Vietnam of people who got up in the morning and read their message traffic and proceeded to the Circle Sportif for lunch and tennis and then returned for a couple of hours in the afternoon and then broke early for happy hour.**

Q: Where had you gotten that impression?

Captain Kerr: Just in talking to people on the trip out. These weren't things that were presented in briefing sessions. These were the private conversations with people who had traveled to Vietnam or

*T-39--a two-engine Air Force jet trainer aircraft with accommodations for passengers.

**The Circle Sportif was originally a country club for French officers in Indochina.

had been on one of the staffs. And I think that was the general impression around Washington too, that you had a structure, as I said earlier, that had become very static in its operations. The impact on the war was hard to measure. At best, it was highly questionable, and at worst we really don't even belong there.

Q: Was there any sense on the part of the admiral that he had been sort of kicked out of town, as you said?

Captain Kerr: I never did get that or infer that from my conversations with him. I don't think that was the sense at all. I think he saw this as another opportunity for himself personally, but also to become involved in the Vietnam conflict, to turn the situation around that had gone sour. The admiral had a sense that this war was becoming an enormous drag on the U.S. military. We were expending enormous funds in Vietnam that we should be expending in terms of modernization of our forces, both strategic and conventional. That the war in terms of its dollar cost was way out of proportion to what benefit we would ever gain from it. That confidence in the U.S. and the U.S. military was beginning to erode as a result of this war, confidence not only at home but internationally. The dollar was being weakened internationally, you recall. We were just beginning to see inflation in this country. The dollar was under attack from abroad. A lot of the opposition of our foreign allies at that time to the war

was driven by the economics of the whole thing. And the admiral, in my judgment, had the breadth and the sensitivity and the understanding of these multidisciplinary factors. In other words, he didn't view it just as a military operation. He understood that. We discussed it, and he helped me understand it.

I had just spent a couple of years in an environment that was trying to study all these things. So what I brought to it was not much experience, but that which a young student who's been examining all these things in an academic arena brings to it. So many times I was able to ask a question or amplify on a point he made. But, fundamentally, the point I want to make is that I was impressed with the admiral obviously for a number of reasons. But one of the things that impressed me was that he arrived in Vietnam with an understanding and a sensitivity to this war that very seldom one attributed to a military commander. He was discussing these things on the plane, voicing these concerns and trying to sort through all the things that must have been going through his mind.

As I said earlier, he was the youngest vice admiral in history going into a situation that clearly was bad. So he had a lot of things to prove--to prove himself, to prove that he was up to this third star that the Navy had given him, while at the same time turn around the situation in country.

Q: He was taking along only one handpicked staff member in you. Was

he willing to take an open mind about the people he had heard these dismal reports about?

Captain Kerr: Well, we'll get to that. I'll talk about the staff a little bit later on.

But I remember we landed at Tan Son Nhut.* Admiral Veth and some of his staff were there to meet us. Just as the door of the plane opened, Admiral Zumwalt turned to me and said, "Well, Howard, this is day one. Let's get on with it." He left the plane, and Admiral Veth was very gracious at planeside, but the fact is that he and the admiral had very little to say to each other during the entire turnover period, as I recall. It was obvious from the time we arrived at our quarters and got to the staff that there was enormous strain in dealing with Admiral Veth. I wouldn't want to draw conclusions without having firsthand information, which I don't, but I think Admiral Veth was not only a bitter, but almost a defeated commander at that time. Defeated in the sense that he was leaving country having been passed over for a third star; his relations with General Abrams were very strained. I know that for a fact. He was very standoffish and cool to Admiral Zumwalt and just sort of went through the motions until the relieving ceremony.

Q: How long did that take for the turnover?

*Tan Son Nhut—an airport/U.S. Air Force Base just east of Saigon.

Captain Kerr: About a week, and that week the admiral and I spent out of Saigon. We left almost immediately for a tour of South Vietnam and all the major naval establishments--not only the operational ones but also the advisory ones. We also went up to the Tonkin Gulf aboard the carrier and met with CTF 77. Cousins was his name.* Then we went to the major task force commands, 115 at Camranh Bay, 116 which was down in the Delta. Binh Thuy is what I want to say, but I'm not sure that's right. And then down to 117, which was the armored.

At that time Captain Bob Salzer was the CTF 117 commander.** He had been in country the longest, I recall. A very impressive warrior-looking officer. He wore a .45 strapped on his chest and grenades around his waist. He looked like the kind of tough commander you ought to have in the Delta. Also what came through immediately was that he was a very smart person.

Out at Camranh Bay was an officer by the name of Roy Hoffman.*** He was also a very tough, hard-bitten commander. He looked like the kind of guy that should be in charge and running things. But, unlike Salzer he just didn't have the sensitivity or the brilliance; I always felt Roy Hoffman was the kind of guy that would have been a military hero in the Second World War, but this was a little too sophisticated situation for him. Sophisticated in the sense he had to know when to

*Rear Admiral Ralph W. Cousins, USN, Commander Task Force 77. TF 77 was the aircraft carrier striking arm of the Seventh Fleet used in the naval air war against Vietnam.

**Captain Robert S. Salzer, USN, Commander Task Force 117.

***Captain Roy F. Hoffman, USN, Commander Task Force 115.

restrain himself. He was a fighter, not a talker, not a position paper guy. I have great admiration for him. He had tremendous courage and guts, but he just wasn't sophisticated like Salzer was.

And the fellow who had 116 was a guy by the name of Art Price.* Art Price was a very pleasant guy who was more of a bureaucrat. He was sort of out of place physically; in other words, he just didn't look the role that Hoffman and Salzer did, but an effective commander.

Q: Well, in Admiral Salzer's oral history he speaks of Price and said that he had an intuitive grasp of tactics. Maybe he couldn't explain it, but he just knew what would work best.

Captain Kerr: Yes. As I said, he was very effective, but when you'd met Salzer and you'd met Hoffman and they were kind of tough, hard-looking guys who fit the image of somebody that was fighting a war in a tough, dirty area, then you came upon Art Price, and he looked like the Assistant Chief of Staff for Planning on the CinCPac staff, although he was a very effective, and a very smart, and a very likeable guy. I'm not trying to denigrate him. I just point out that there were personality differences. Salzer was clearly, clearly--in my judgment--the guy who had the best grasp overall of--he was the best mixture of the fighter as well as the person who understood the war and could articulate it. I think Admiral Zumwalt shared that

*Captain Arthur W. Price, Jr., USN, Commander Task Force 116.

feeling, although he had great respect for all of them, and they all responded to Admiral Zumwalt in what he wanted to do very effectively. All of those men showed great resolve and understanding and courage in battle. They served the Navy and Admiral Zumwalt and the country with great distinction during the period in which I was there.

Q: Did Admiral Veth send a representative around with you on this briefing tour?

Captain Kerr: No, he did not. He didn't send anyone around with us. They set up the tour for us, the itinerary. That was about it.

It was an interesting trip. It was our first real view of Vietnam physically--a beautiful country. It was our first opportunity to actually talk to people who were in country. It was interesting to see the different perspectives between people on the staffs as we were being briefed and the people who were actually on the ground. That's generally true in any situation. It's not limited to Vietnam.

But the one thing I do recall is that we came away from those days with a clear understanding that the staff in Saigon was cut off from the forces out in the field. Their relationship was one of telephone calls and messages. Admiral Veth's presence was not really a factor in country in terms of the troops knowing him and seeing him or having any kind of a dialogue with him or with any of the senior people on his staff. It was kind of like people sometimes describe the type

commander's staff in the Navy. You get messages from them and you talk to them occasionally on the telephone, but you never see them-- unless there is a problem, a serious one, then maybe somebody will come down to the ship.

But this was a war that was not going our way, one that was constantly under examination, constantly being questioned. You would think that with the commitment that the U.S. Navy had in country that the commander would regularly have to be on top of things in a very personal way, as well as getting out and talking to the people in the field so that he could be in a position to respond and adjust his policies or his strategy. But I never sensed when we got over there that there was anything like that at all. It was just a sleepy, large, moribund staff which had fallen into a static pattern of reading message traffic, pulling out of that message traffic what they considered to be important, briefing it to the admiral in the morning—a panoply of statistics on the number of boats that had gone up the river, the number that had been stopped, the number that had been searched, the number that had confiscated contraband or had not. And there was never anyone who questioned, "Well, what the hell does all this mean? What is the relevance of this to the war effort?"

You know, the fact that last week you stopped 15 boats and this week you stopped 20; does that mean that your war effort has increased by a factor of 25%? What is the real relevance of it? I guess it comes down to the fact that there really wasn't a clearly defined

mission at that time. There was a mission, but I mean one that was under examination and that was clearly defined in terms of bringing the Navy in-country effort to bear on those situations in the Delta that that force could relate to and could impact on and thereby support the overall efforts of the commander in Vietnam.*

Q: Well, Market Time had a mission at that time.

Captain Kerr: Market Time had done its mission. Market Time had basically accomplished its mission.

But, remember, the issue here was, as I recall, the infiltration of arms into IV Corps through Cambodia. They were crossing the waterways that the Navy could get on. In other words, you could put a presence without actually having to be ashore. We had three commands that were basically operating independently. If you could bring those together in some sort of an integrated way, you could--and in a mission that would be supportive of the effort, i.e., interdiction of these arms that were coming in, make it more difficult for the enemy to introduce those arms, and make him pay a price for that--that's what eventually was done and was not being done when Admiral Zumwalt arrived there. As I said, they had fallen into a static kind of operation. And the relevance of those operations, although they had

*Delta--the Mekong River Delta, an interlocking network of waterways which provided the primary vehicle of commerce and transport in South Vietnam.

accomplished the mission which they had originally been assigned, it was a dynamic situation. The war was changing constantly. And one had to be perceptive enough and creative enough to constantly be employing his forces in a relevant way with regards to the changes.

Now, the one thing that we learned in the Vietnam War is that if you cut the enemy off with one pattern of operations, they are going to see that immediately and just adjust their operations to move around it and minimize the impact of what you've done. So what you've got to do is be prepared to understand that first of all, analyze it, and adjust your operations. We hadn't done that. We had denied the major waterways to the Vietnamese. They didn't need the major waterways anymore. They had found other routes to get their ammunition in country. We had Market Time operations which were successful, but they had end-run those. They were bringing them around to Sihanoukville and bringing them down through the Parrot's Beak and across the other border areas of Vietnam and Cambodia.* So we had to recognize that and adjust our operations accordingly.

Anyway, we finished that week of travel with a sense that we had-- well, let me put it this way. We realized the Vietnam War was being fought by young people. It was lieutenants and lieutenant JGs and ensigns. That's the first thing that struck you. I think I was struck by how involved, how committed, how perceptive and intelligent,

*Sihanoukville--the principal seaport of Cambodia; "Parrot's Beak"--a peculiarly shaped indentation by which Cambodia juts into Vietnam on the border between the two countries.

and articulate these people were. And it was clear that they were just yearning and looking for some leadership. They felt detached from the whole Saigon staff, as I said, and they had basically fallen into this static pattern, and they were looking for somebody who could interject some ideas, some creativity, some innovation, and some dynamism and get them involved, so they had a greater sense of participation in the war effort and a greater sense that the involvement, the commitment, the time, the money, the effort that was being put into that war by the 38,000 sailors that were there was having more meaning than what it was.

Q: What was your perception of how General Abrams felt the Navy's role should be in Vietnam?

Captain Kerr: Well, I believe General Abrams felt that the Navy should be more involved. Here again, I am repeating myself, but we had fallen into this static pattern of operations that really wasn't having much of an impact on the war effort. Now, one of the ways in which you can measure involvement in a war is by casualties, and the Navy wasn't taking any casualties in country. I don't know that this conclusion was drawn. I certainly never heard anybody say it. It was never said to me, nor was it said in my presence to anyone else. But the fact is there were a hell of a lot of casualties being taken in 1968, as we know, and very few of them were sailors. People could

cynically conclude that the Navy just was restraining itself. What I mean by restraining itself is not that there was a deliberate policy on the part of the Navy to minimize their in-country casualties. Keep in mind that when I talk about casualties here, I'm not talking about Seventh Fleet operations and air operations. I'm talking strictly about the in-country operations which were focused in the Delta. We simply were not engaging the enemy. A measure of engagement is the measure of casualties, not only enemy casualties but your own. So my impression was that General Abrams was not happy with the leadership of the Navy in-country in Vietnam.

A couple episodes that probably reflect more the personal relationships than the professional ones: when I arrived in Saigon, I was in Admiral Veth's office, and I got a phone call from General Abrams' office that was supposed to be taken by Admiral Veth's aide, but I was in the office so I took it. The colonel who was on the other line--General Abrams' aide--said to me, "When are you people going to respond to General Abrams' invitation to have a farewell party for Admiral Veth?"

I wasn't familiar with that and I told him. He said, "Look, this is insulting to the general, and I wish you would get back to us."

It was clear at that time that there had been other phone calls. So I went in to see Admiral Veth and told him that I had received this call and thinking that there had somehow been a foul-up in the office and failure to respond and it was just a question of getting a

response from him and then I would pass it on. He basically told me that I could call them and tell them that he wasn't going to be present at any farewell party that General Abrams wanted to give to him.

The other episode that comes to mind was when Admiral Zumwalt went over to make his call on General Abrams, Admiral Veth accompanied him. We got over to the MACV headquarters, and the call was scheduled for like 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon. And General Abrams kept those two admirals waiting for about 50 minutes. Then when he came out into the anteroom to greet them, both Admiral Zumwalt and Admiral Veth stood up. General Abrams went over and shook Admiral Zumwalt's hand and totally ignored Admiral Veth. He didn't even acknowledge that he was in the room, let alone shake his hand. Then they all went into his office. What happened in there I don't know.

From those two episodes it was clear that there was a strain between Veth and Abrams. What had caused that, people who were there would have to opine on that. But I can assure you that there was a strain, and the chemistry between Veth and Abrams was not good and I think that essentially the situation that I've described here was common knowledge among an awful lot of people who were in Saigon and in country at that time.

Q: How soon did you get on with trying to turn this thing around and provide more bold leadership?

Captain Kerr: Well, the admiral did it immediately. In fact, he had been thinking about it a great deal prior to arrival in country. We had discussed informally a background of circumstances and pressures that called for bold action. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. I think I've already discussed the fact that the admiral, in my judgment, had a very broad understanding of the world situation, the domestic situation in this country and what the true cost of this war was to not only the American fighting men in country, but also to America's position as a world leader. And particularly what it was costing in terms of our ability to stay abreast with the Soviet military buildup that was really accelerating during that period, as we now know, in both the strategic and conventional sense.

The admiral believed that domestic politics would drive the situation in Vietnam as much as anything. He believed that one of the major efforts of his command should be to turn the U.S. Navy effort in country Vietnam over to the Vietnamese. I remember him stating that if Nixon won the election, we probably would have 18 months. If Humphrey won the election, we might only have six months.* In other words, recognition that, really, the '68 election was almost a vote on the issue of Vietnam and that, either way, the vote was to get things turned over to the Vietnamese and get out. But the real meaning of the vote was what sort of a window, or time frame, we were going to

*In the 1968 election for U.S. President, Republican Richard M. Nixon defeated Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey, then the incumbent Vice President.

have to execute that.

Q: What time was the relief? This was maybe a month before the elections?

Captain Kerr: This was in October. He took over then in Vietnam.*

Q: Was there anything noteworthy about the change of command itself?

Captain Kerr: Not really. All the heavies were there--Abrams, McCain, Bunker, all the Vietnamese, all the other countries that were there.** We had an interesting sidelight. We were putting together the seating arrangements for the change of command, and the Taiwanese Government was represented in country with a three- or ~~four~~-star admiral, but Christ, his date of rank was back in the early Forties, so he had a hell of a lot of seniority. And we had him on the front row, the third seat or something and Admiral Veth called and said, "I want that changed." He wanted a friend of his put in that seat. We tried to argue him out of that on the basis that protocol would be violated. He basically told us that protocol be damned--he wanted that person in that seat, and we put her there and protocol was

*The formal change of command for U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam took place on board the USS Garrett County (LST-786) at Saigon on 30 September 1968.

**Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., USN, Commander in Chief Pacific (CinCPac). Ellsworth Bunker, U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam.

violated. The Taiwanese admiral was very unhappy about it. But, other than that, the change of command went off without incident.

It was a typical change of command. Admiral Zumwalt gave a very short acceptance address and returned to the office immediately. In fact, I didn't even go to the change of command. I stayed at the office. I was preparing some bullets at that time. Bullets were kind of a precursor to Z-grams.

Q: What was the immediate impact Admiral Zumwalt had on the staff?

Captain Kerr: The impact that the admiral had on the Saigon staff was not too unlike the impact that he had on the Navy when he became CNO. He literally shook it right to its marrow and did it in a very short period of time. The Circle Sportif's memberships fell off. The happy hour participation fell off. People were arriving very early in the morning, were working all day, and staying very late at night. The Saigon operation became a seven-day-a-week operation.

But he had an enormous impact on the staff. And I don't mean just in a sense of shaking them up. He had a very positive impact, particularly people like Salzer and others who could respond to the admiral's kind of creative and innovative leadership and who saw that what he was doing was involving the Navy in a very positive way. They responded magnificently, as did a lot of the members of the staff. But there were a lot who simply did not, who just fought it. Those

who fought, they lost. They lost in a number of ways. They lost in the sense that they failed to participate in something that was becoming, in my judgment, a very significant effort in country. They lost in the sense they just became miserable in their jobs.

I saw it probably a little bit closer than the admiral did, because I was down in the trenches with them. A lot of them resented me. They resented the pattern in which the admiral worked, the way he did things. He used me as a person to convey what he wanted done. Not the first time; in other words, he would put out what he wanted done, but a lot of times people didn't understand exactly what he wanted. I would watch that and go down and try to diplomatically tell them that they were on the wrong course. A lot of people were responsive to that in the sense that they appreciated that effort, because they wanted to be supportive, and they wanted to do what the admiral wanted. There were others who deliberately misinterpreted what the hell he wanted. The last thing they wanted was some smart young lieutenant who had the admiral's ear to come down, and who had been in country, by the way, for a week, and who had read some history books on Vietnam, and the last thing they needed was him coming down and telling them how the hell to do their job.

Q: Did he tend to work through you rather than the chief of staff?

Captain Kerr: Well, he worked through a lot of people. The admiral

didn't have any set pattern. The admiral tended to go with the people that got the job done, as opposed to living within the structure. And, the first chief of staff we had there just didn't get it done. So the admiral basically bypassed him.

Emmett Tidd came in and took over as chief of staff, and he got the job done.* Then the admiral began working through the chief of staff. So the admiral's bias was to always go with the people that would get the job done, whom he could relate to and related to him, understood what he wanted to do, supported what he wanted to do. Supported in the sense of not just genuflecting to everything he said, but argued with him, gave him their thoughts, their objections, et cetera. He always accepted that. But who essentially moved out and got the job done. And those people who fought the program eventually were cut out.

Q: Captain Orme was his predecessor, wasn't he, as chief of staff? **

Captain Kerr: No. It was a fellow by the name of Joe Rizza who was his--well, Captain Orme was there when we arrived and he stayed on for about two weeks into the Zumwalt tour. But the guy who relieved him was a fellow by the name of Joe Rizza, Captain Joe Rizza, who had been a destroyer squadron commander. *** Very delightful guy personally,

*Captain Emmett H. Tidd, USN.

**Captain Samuel T. Orme, USN.

***Captain Joseph P. Rizza, USN.

but he just didn't respond in the time frame that the admiral wanted.

Admiral Zumwalt would suggest something. People who ended up being on the team were the guys that either had the answer then or were back within an hour. But the traditional staff way of running--namely, take it, go back, analyze it, do a memo, send a memo out for comment--was a more bureaucratic approach to things. It just didn't work. And the guy who would get the answer back, the kind of answer the admiral wanted, give him the kind of support that he wanted--that's the guy that the admiral favored.

There were an awful lot of things that had to be done on the staff, just the pro forma work, and it takes a good bureaucratic approach to get those things done. But the admiral wasn't there just to oversee and manage a bureaucracy. He wanted to turn things around. He wanted to get involved. He wanted some creative, innovative thinking. So he had to reach out--in some cases, go around some of the staff structure and find those people who could respond and assist him in getting done what he wanted to do. And essentially, as I recall, there were three major things that he was out to do. One was to get the Navy involved. In other words, to take the three task forces that were there. Get those three task forces together in a common effort. As I said, they each had their own mission, but to bring them together in some sort of an interactive process that would support the efforts in the Delta. And what grew out of that idea was SEA LORDS. The other thing was to begin to start the planning for the

turnover to the Vietnamese. We wanted that to go ahead on an accelerated fashion. The third thing was to get some operations going in what was called the Rung Sat Zone, the Forest of Assassins. It was the one area in Vietnam where the Vietnamese Navy had some jurisdiction and had a mission. So those were three things that he wanted to move on quickly. And he reached out and grabbed Bob Salzer and said, "Bob, I want to do this." And Bob Salzer ran off and started to proceed immediately to plan and put together a SEA LORDS operation. In other words, took the lead on that.

I remember one day he called in his senior advisor, a captain by the name of Paul Arbo, who was senior advisor to the Vietnamese Navy.* He called in the assistant chief of staff for plans. I forget the captain's name at that time. Then he called in another new officer who had arrived in country by the name of "Chick" Rauch.** He told each of them that he wanted to put together a plan that would turn over all the assets that the Navy had to the Vietnamese Navy, plus the mission, in as I recall, it was 6 months, 12 months, 18 months. In other words, those are the three options for your plan.

Q: How big a staff was it overall—Naval Forces Vietnam?

Captain Kerr: We must have had 50 people in the headquarters in

*Captain Paul E. Arbo, USN.

**Captain Charles F. Rauch, Jr., USN.

Saigon.

But let me just finish up on that point. The Naval Advisory Group basically came back and fought that plan. In other words, said, "There is no way you can do that." The assistant chief of staff for plans, as I recall, didn't say it couldn't be done, but he just couldn't find a way to make it happen. Then Rauch came back and said, "Here's how we can get started on it." So he became the action guy on this. That is significant on how the admiral operated. In other words, you call in two or three people, you give them each the job, discuss it with them, then see who's going to come back and give you the kind of thing that you want.

You know, just parenthetically here, I think that the response that Captain Arbo came back with, the senior naval advisor at the time, was indicative of the pattern, the psyche, the mentality that all the advisory effort had fallen into at that time in Vietnam--namely, that it will take us years to get these guys to become involved in this war. Years to turn over this effort to them. In other words, there really wasn't a very good sense of the enormous pressure that there was in this country, and the policy that was evolving at that time, or that was soon to evolve, which was one of replacement. In other words, replacement of troops with Vietnamese and replacement of U.S. mission with Vietnamese mission. And I think that the admiral sensed that. He understood that. He saw it coming. Remember, this is in October before the election. Nobody else did--on

the Navy side anyway.

I'll tell you another incident later on which I think will support that, that it really wasn't understood by any of the services in country at that time.

So, just to wrap up these thoughts, the admiral arrived in Vietnam at a time when, I think, morale of the U.S. in-country forces were low. Not universally. There were some units where it was high. There were some units where it was very low. But, I think, essentially the morale was not that high. We were not really involved and engaged in enemy action at the time. The utilization of our forces, I think, was questionable overall. I think there was bad chemistry between the Navy commander and Abrams. I think the Navy's attitude towards the in-country effort was one of, "How in the hell did we ever get ourselves into this in the beginning?" And, "How did we ever let it grow to the point where it is?"

Into this came Admiral Zumwalt, who did a magnificent job of turning that around, of involving the forces, giving them a new mission, engaging the enemy, supporting the overall effort of General Abrams, who conceived and implemented a plan to turn the Navy's war over to the Vietnamese and got out ahead of the other services in that regard, and someone who became an enormous morale boost to all the forces that were in country at that time. And someone who became a dominant force in country. This, by the way, was not the situation early on, because the first couple of months we were there, Navy

commanders would come into Vietnam, and they didn't necessarily even come over to see us. After about two months, not only were they coming by to see us, but we even had to get a trailer so that we could house the senior Navy people who were spending the night with us, with Admiral Zumwalt. They wanted to know what he was doing from him, because he had become a force to be reckoned with in that war effort, in the politics of what was going on.

So, you say, "How long did it take him to get started?" Well, I'd say that he got started right after he returned from his change of command.

Q: It sounds as if he got started even before that.

Captain Kerr: Well, he did, but he had a full head of steam going very shortly. He essentially knew what he wanted to do. The pattern was to reach out and grab the people that could do it, bypass those who, for whatever reason, objected to it or didn't want to do it. And I guess the way to judge it is to look at it now in the perspective of history, and I think that people will judge that what he did was the right thing, and it was the correct thing. And I know that General Abrams particularly was extremely responsive, and impressed, and also appreciative, appreciative in the sense of one military commander appreciating the support he was receiving from a component commander, which he hadn't been receiving in the past.

Q: You mentioned that the Navy was ahead of the other services in plans for turning over assets to the Vietnamese. Could you go into more detail on that, please?

Captain Kerr: Well, throughout the month of October we had the staff working to put together the outline of a plan on how this would be accomplished, and what it was going to take to accomplish it, particularly from the Vietnamese point of view. Did they have the sailors? Did they have the training? Did they have the organization? Were they prepared to accept these assets, as well as the mission that went with these assets?

The admiral was double-hatted in Vietnam. Not only was he the commander of the forces, in that sense an operational commander or component commander, but he also was the chief of the naval advisory group. As I have indicated, there was a senior naval advisor who ran it day to day, but the admiral was the chief of the advisory group. So he had the responsibility for the overall advisory effort of the naval forces in country.

General Abrams met with these advisors from time to time. It turned out that the first scheduled meeting after Admiral Zumwalt assumed command was very early November, just before the election. I forget the exact date now, but it was just before the November election. As you may recall, General Abrams was called back to Washington by President Johnson for discussions and a review of the war. A bombing halt was declared prior to the election, while General

Abrams was in Washington.* So, against that backdrop, General Abrams returned to Saigon, and he had arrived the morning of this advisory presentation. All three of the services were presenting that morning.

The admiral and I went over to MACV headquarters, went in the briefing room. General George Brown, Commander of the Seventh Air Force, was there. I forget the chief advisor on the Army side, lieutenant general. And General Abrams and a host of other staff people.

General Abrams came into the room. He was obviously tired from the long trip. He always had kind of a grouchy look about him. His face was drawn. He had bags under his eyes and jet lag. A big cigar in his hand, and he sat down at the table. It was the first time I had ever really seen him in any environment other than his outer office. As a young officer, I remember I was just enormously impressed with this guy. He came in there and was real tough, a hard-looking guy. He sat down and commanded everyone's attention. He turned and said, "All right, let's get on with the briefing."

The Air Force was up first, and this colonel stood up. He looked like something right out of a picture poster or an advertisement for the Air Force. He looked like Steve Canyon. He was perfectly coiffured. His uniform was wrinkle-less. Somehow the colonels in the

*In the spring of 1968, when he announced he would not run for reelection, President Lyndon B. Johnson put most of North Vietnam off-limits to U.S. bombing and shelling. On 1 November 1968, that prohibition was extended to all of North Vietnam, including the southern panhandle.

Air Force never get wrinkles in their uniforms. He got up, and the first slide came on, and it was red, white, and blue with lots of numbers. Up at the top is the logo of the command with thunderbolts coming out on either side of the logo. The first thing that struck me was, "Jesus, they are really going to laugh at us, because we didn't even have a visual arts section over at the NavForV headquarters.* We couldn't have prepared a slide if we'd wanted to. What we had was a flip chart, and either the admiral or myself or both had written what he was going to use as a guide in longhand on these flip charts. As the person who was going to do the flipping and the pointing, I was struck by the fact that they were going to think that we had just fallen off the turnip truck, compared to this good-looking Air Force colonel and the neat slides with all the numbers and the colors and the thunderbolts. And he proceeded to give this flawless briefing that he had memorized. Looking back now, it had probably been drafted by four or five people and he had three or four days to memorize it. And he was going through it flawlessly. I remember now the projections were out through 1976. And, at that moment, in '76, as I recall, most of the Air Force assets would be transferred to the Vietnamese.

General Abrams was watching him. I happened to look over. All of a sudden, he put his hand up on his head, and he stared at the table. This colonel was continuing in his monologue. General Abrams put the

*NavForV--U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Admiral Zumwalt's command.

cigar in his mouth, and he raised his right hand and he made a fist and he hit the table. And when he did, the ashtray in front of him flipped over and came crashing down on this table. The colonel stopped briefing, and everyone at the table turned to General Abrams. He said, "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit! All I ever get out of the Air Force is a bunch of bullshit." I was in a state of semishock at that time, and this poor colonel was urinating down the right side of his leg. But, anyway, General Abrams got everybody's attention.

I'm paraphrasing, but basically what he said was, "Don't you people understand what's happening? Don't you have any sense for the pressure-cooker environment," and those are the words he used, "that the President is in back in the United States?" He said, "He has no consensus for support for this war. What support he has is dwindling. It's clear that the policy is to get us out of this war and turn it over to the Vietnamese. That policy change will be implemented by the incoming administration, but, let me tell you, that's Johnson's policy right today. I've got a letter in my pocket from the President of the United States that directs me to turn this war over to the Vietnamese, and I can tell you that if anybody interferes with that, that I am to go right around them." And he said, "I can tell you right now, that we're going to give Defense, we're going to give CinCPac, we're going to give anybody that's in between us and the President an opportunity to get on board, but if they don't get on board, I'm going right around them. You are sitting here today and telling me that it's

going to be 1976 before you can get these planes turned over to the Vietnamese?" He said, "No way, can't happen. The country won't give us that time. The incoming administration won't give us that time. Besides, I now have direct orders from the President to get this thing over with as soon as possible." Over with in the sense of getting things turned over.

What General Abrams was trying to convey was what was being felt in the country, was being felt by the President, and which, obviously, the people in country were out of touch with, except for Admiral Zumwalt who had, as I said earlier, sensed that and had moved out in advance of this meeting, but who had done so in a cautious way. By that I mean our briefing chart had a lot of caveats in it. We knew that there were a lot of assets that were required to make this happen, and a lot of things had to come together, and some priorities had to be reordered to make it happen. So, what the admiral had put together in this briefing was a cautious briefing. Nonetheless, he had anticipated this as a policy that the United States would adopt. So the general got up and left. General Abrams' chief of staff came up to Admiral Zumwalt, and I was standing there with him. And he said, "Bud, you can see the general's tired and the direction that this briefing went in. It's clearly unsettling him. If you would like to rework your presentation, we could schedule it for another time."

Well, Admiral Zumwalt was sitting there like the guy at a poker

table who had just drawn to the inside straight. He said, "No, General, I'd like to go ahead and make my presentation."

The general said, "All right, Bud, if that's what you want to do, I'll go and tell "Abe." Let's give him about 45 minutes to clear his head and come down from the emotional level that he's at right now."

The admiral turned to me. He said, "Howard, get the briefing charts."

I got them, and we went back into a room. We started flipping through these charts that we had, and every one of the caveats we had, we were scrubbing out. All the "maybe's" we were changing to "will," and all the "perhaps's" got taken out. Anything that represented some hesitancy at all or a sense that we might not be able to pull this off was basically redirected to, "If you give us this support, here's what we can do."

So General Abrams came back in, and the admiral started his briefing, and the general was paying attention. And so was everybody else. Some of the people could see some of the flaws in it, and some of the assumptions that in terms of the assets that would be needed to make this happen. We were assuming that we could get those, the Vietnamese Navy would get those. So they began to challenge that. This one Army general thought what would be needed to make this happen was a much larger draw on recruits by the Vietnamese Navy than had been their quota in the past, and those could only come from the Army. So he saw immediately a drawdown in his assets going to the Vietnamese

Navy. So he raised that issue, and General Abrams told him to shut up. He said, "The Air Force have already dug themselves into a cesspool here today." And he said, "Young Bud Zumwalt may be doing the same thing, but so far he's making some sense, so let's hear him out."

Well, he heard the admiral out. As usual, the admiral did a brilliant job of briefing. Parenthetically, of all the people I've ever seen get up and give a presentation, he has to be the best. And the reason for that, of course, is that he not only knows the material, but he helps draft his own material. So the guy that sits down and actually drafts his material understands it. The admiral was his own action officer in many cases on these things. So he knew it, and that comes across in a briefing. He not only has good presence and good style and all that, but substantively he knew his material, and that came across. That impressed people.

So the general at the end said, "All right, here is what I'd like to know. I need to know what you as Commander Naval Forces Vietnam can do on your own with the authority that you have and the assets that you have. And I need to know what support you need within the Navy chain of command to make this happen. I need to know what I can do as Commander Military Assistance Command Vietnam with the assets and authority that I have. And I need to know what I would have to go up and get assets and authority from my chain of command." He said, "When can you have that information?"

The admiral said, "Monday." As I recall, this was a Friday, and at that moment the only thing that was on paper was what was on those flip charts.

So the general said, "Fine. I'd like to see it on Monday." And Abrams stood up and everybody got up in the room and started to walk out. He took about two steps and turned around and he said, "Bud, come on with me. I want you to come down to my office."

I walked over to where General Abrams was, and the admiral walked over to him. The general put his arm around the admiral's shoulder, and he walked down to his office. I followed them down there. What was going through my mind at the time was the admiral didn't just guess right; he analyzed correctly. He had seen what needed to be done. He had gotten out ahead. He had chosen the time and had been very lucky. The timing was almost perfect. He had begun to put together the structure of his command and a relationship with General Abrams that just did nothing but improve over the next few months. But he was clearly out front on this issue of Vietnamization. When he arrived in country, he moved quickly to present that idea to General Abrams. As it turned out, the timing of it couldn't have been more perfect.

Q: So did he get it in by Monday?

Captain Kerr: Yes, oh yea--we got something over there by Monday. What was going through my mind was, "How in the hell are we ever going

to get this piece of paper done up by Monday?" So we got in the car, and I said, "That was a great performance, Boss, and I know the general is delighted, but how in the hell are we ever going to get anything over there by Monday?"

He said, "Well, we'll put it in sections. Really, the only thing we have to do is get a piece of paper over there, and the first part of it has to be done fairly well. But that big bureaucracy over there will play around with it for a few weeks. So we will redo each section a little more thoroughly and a little more carefully. Then, as we get through each iteration, we'll run someone over there with that section and tell them this is the next draft. By the time it really gets to General Abrams, we'll have plenty of time to have gotten a good plan together.

Well, we worked very hard all weekend and got the shell over there. But basically Vietnamization was off the ground from a conceptual point of view and then proceeded to get into the actual details, which, of course, were far more difficult. We had a lot more problems than were anticipated, but nonetheless it happened. And it gave General Abrams, as a commander who had just been given orders by the commander in chief, an opportunity to feel that he was being responsive to the commander in chief and responsive to national policy. And also, I'm sure, it must have given him a sense that "God, I've finally got someone in the Navy over here that understands my problems and is working to assist me in my problems and is getting

involved and is supporting me."

I think from that moment on, you could just sense the changing relationships between the Navy and the Navy command and MACV. When I first got there, I really felt like a second-class citizen. We were treated with disdain. But after about a month or so people returned your phone calls. They were polite. They had nice things to say about you on the phone. They would comment on the whole new image that NavForV was beginning to develop--particularly the Navy guys that were on General Abrams' staff out at Tan Son Nhut. They sensed this right away. They would call you on the phone and tell you, "I don't know what's happened, but at the mess and around the offices, people are beginning to talk up the NavForV staff as opposed to laughing at it."

That meant a great deal to everybody on the staff, and for those people who had seen the admiral's effort as one which they wanted to really get behind and support, this was the kind of thing that gave them encouragement to become even more deeply involved and supportive. For those who hadn't seen it that way, many of them, it didn't make any difference. They were leaving anyway; their tour was over. For some of those who had trouble getting on board, they began to see the positive aspects of the admiral's leadership or of his policies. Really there were many of them like the guy who just missed the train. He got on a later train, but he had missed that first train. But basically the staff was very supportive. Of course, along these

lines, the admiral had been working very hard from the beginning to try to upgrade the staff as well as to reward those people who had come to Vietnam and spent a tour there.

Q: How did he upgrade the staff?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think that there was a general perception that an in-country tour didn't really count. And notwithstanding the phony pronouncements out of the bureau that only the top guys were going to Vietnam, the fact is that it just wasn't true.*

Q: Why not?

Captain Kerr: You would just have to probably ask some people who were back in the bureau. I can give you what my opinion on it was. First of all, there were a lot of top people in Vietnam. But what the bureau was advertising was that everyone that went to Vietnam was in the top 10%. Well, that was utter nonsense. It's not true. In fact, you know it was a joke among junior officers, "I just found out I was in the top 10% today; I got my orders to Vietnam."

One of the giveaways was that the detailers weren't ordering themselves to Vietnam, or each other to Vietnam. One exception to that was Captain Sam Orme who had been the captain detailer. He told me one night that he ordered himself to Vietnam, because he just

*Bureau--Bureau of Naval Personnel.

couldn't live with himself having sent so many people to Vietnam that he felt that he had no choice but to order himself to Vietnam. I think that was the exception in the bureau rather than the rule. Now I separate out once again what was happening in the Seventh Fleet; that was a different situation. I'm just talking about in country now. You had the Bob Salzers and you had the Sam Ormes and down the line you had an awful lot of talented JOs. But there were just an awful lot of people there that were not the best that was available at the time.

Q: And there were not incentives provided for people to go.

Captain Kerr: Well, no, there weren't any incentives to go, and there weren't any rewards for having done a good tour there. Admiral Zumwalt fought like hell to give some rewards to the lieutenant commander who had gone over to Vietnam and who had done exceptionally well, who had put his life on the line, who had been in a very threatening environment for a year, and who when he came out was getting zero credit for that from the bureau and wasn't even making the XO cut.* That was kind of ~~the~~^{of} typical guy. He worked very hard trying to turn that around. He put his own personal involvement in it. We used to talk to the bureau almost every night from Saigon in

*XO cut--Typically, in order to continue on the promotion progression, a surface line lieutenant commander had to be picked to serve as executive officer of a destroyer-type ship.

an effort to impress upon them the fact that, "You may not agree with what the country is doing; you may not agree that this is the kind of training that a naval officer needs, but the fact is that this is national policy; the country is at war, and we are the warriors dedicated to fighting this country's battles. It's incumbent upon us to ensure that the very best people are sent over, because people's lives are at stake and the national honor and prestige are at stake in this particular war." And our ability to execute a very complicated sophisticated mission—namely, as I've said before, getting the Navy involved while at the same time trying to train the Vietnamese Navy and turn the damned thing over. It was a multifaceted operation that involved a lot of sophistication. It just required the best talent the Navy had. That's the way Admiral Zumwalt felt about it. The bureau simply was not supporting that up until that time.

Now, they responded to him, and you began to see a little turnaround. Pretty soon, after nine months or so, some people who were considered "front-runners" began to show up in country. But up until the time Admiral Zumwalt got there, that was simply not the pattern, not the case. I feel that in many cases the detailers were being driven by what they considered the right, quote, right career pattern for a surface guy, and it just didn't include a tour in Vietnam. It was more important to go off to destroyer school, or have a weapons officer tour on a DDG or something than it was to go to

Vietnam.* Those guys were doing just what they basically were being told what the policy within the bureau is. So, in that sense, we weren't getting support even from our own personnel distribution system for the Vietnam war in-country at that time. They supported us in the sense of putting in the numbers that had to be there. They were there. But they were not reaching down and looking for the top people and putting them over there. In a sense, it was inconsistent with the right career path to go over there.

You reflect upon that, and it's an extraordinarily hard thing to understand for me--how we could view that war as just another tour of duty; it turned out that it just didn't rank as high as other tours of duty. There are an awful lot of people who have remarked to me that at the time they didn't want to go to Vietnam--not that they were afraid to go to Vietnam, but they just didn't see how it was going to help their career.

Q: What did Admiral Zumwalt do to provide incentives for the Navy captains that were there?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think one of the biggest incentives right away was when Bob Salzer got selected for flag. There had never been a flag officer out of Vietnam. He got selected for flag. People tend to go to where people are being selected. If the water at this hole

*DDG--guided missile destroyer.

is a little bit sweeter, that's where everybody goes to drink. And the water in South Vietnam had been a little stale. So when Bob Salzer got selected, that sent out a signal through the Navy. Zumwalt was there. Zumwalt was building a reputation. It was becoming common knowledge that Zumwalt had taken charge, had taken hold. The Navy was turning its act around and on in South Vietnam. That some good people were beginning to go there, to get involved. Bob Salzer had been selected for flag.

Q: Well, I think he was selected after he left.

Captain Kerr: Well, he had left, but see, he only had a few months to do when Admiral Zumwalt arrived. It didn't make any difference when he got it. The fact is that it came right after his tour in Vietnam. So that was seen as a plus.

Q: My point is that the principal subordinates were still captains, whereas their counterparts, you were saying earlier, in the other services were generals.

Captain Kerr: Yes. That didn't change. The admiral never got those jobs upgraded to flag rank. But he began to write the kind of fitness reports that helped people. He got General Abrams to sign off fitness reports for some of those officers, which was very helpful. Those are

the kinds of things that you do to begin to support your subordinates in the field. He went personally after people. He used to get on the phone at night and call them. He'd work the detailers at night. A lieutenant commander comes out of Saigon with a top record, and the bureau doesn't give that any merit. And instead of going to an XO's tour, he goes someplace else; that tells the lieutenant commander community something. The admiral understood that, and he tried to turn that around--not only to give the right image of what was happening in Vietnam, but because he believed that that person deserved that because of what he had done in-country.

You know, the admiral once said that every fitness report you'd get in the Navy that's not under fire is just a guess. These guys were out in the field. They were getting shot at. They were running the war. The responsibility, the initiative, the sense of command and leadership that they were learning at this early age was remarkable. Plus, they were doing it in the battlefield. Those were traits and values and demonstrated performance things that are more important to a fighting man in many respects than being able to run an NTDS system on a guided missile destroyer.* In other words, you could learn to run an NTDS system, but you never know how the guy is going to react in battle unless he's been in it. And these guys had been in it. and our own system wasn't recognizing that. If the guy somehow hadn't

*NTDS--Navy tactical data system, a sophisticated combat information and threat-warning system installed in the newer ships of the fleet, primarily those ships armed with guided missiles.

been at the top of his performance ratings on his last ship, that's what they were paying more attention to than how well he was doing in-country. I feel very strongly that the bureau let the Navy down in-country. I think, as I said, it began to turn around after Admiral Zumwalt got there, but I don't think that the Bureau of Naval Personnel with regards to its detailing policies in the in-country effort, prior to 1968 certainly, can be very proud of its efforts to support the war. I mean they were more concerned about their own selfish policies of putting people in the right jobs and keeping them on the, quote, career path than they were with supporting the war effort in Vietnam.

Q: Well, did he work it from the other end also? There is a delayed reaction if you have to wait until the selection board results come out. Did he badger BuPers to send him brighter, better people earlier?

Captain Kerr: Yes, absolutely. There were people that were going off to the war colleges. I hate to belabor this, and I'm probably a little cynical about it, but I had people tell me that their detailer told them, "Let me put you at the Naval War College. You don't want to go to Vietnam. That's not going to do your career any good. You might as well spend a year at the Naval War College." Can you imagine that? The goddamned country is at war! People are getting killed!

And we're thinking in terms of what's best for promotion purposes. It's unreal. In many respects, while I have disdain for both, I have less disdain for the person who ran off to Canada than I have for the person who ran off in uniform to the Naval War College.

Q: What about handpicking people for the immediate staff? Did Admiral Zumwalt do any of that?

Captain Kerr: Yes, he did. Some he got and some he didn't. One that he didn't who comes to mind was Harry Train, who was on the Second Fleet staff at the time.* He tried to get him, and Harry Train had just been selected to go up to be Admiral Moorer's executive assistant.** That was the level that he was after. He wanted nothing but the very best.

Q: You mentioned Captain Tidd; was this somebody he sought out?

Captain Kerr: No, Emmett Tidd had orders in, but he had orders into a different job. He brought him in to be his chief of staff. I'm sorry, the names don't come to me right now. I'd have to go back and take a look at the staff structure at that time.

*Harry D. Train II retired as a four-star admiral in 1982, having served as Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, among his various top-level billets.

**Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, USN, was then Chief of Naval Operations.

But he was certainly interested, not just in his own personal staff, but he was interested mostly in the operating forces. A lot of these people were at the lieutenant commander and commander level. Whereas the flag officers are kind of easy to remember, these were awfully good people, talented people, and people who as a group weren't necessarily being sent in-country. But we eventually began to see a real turnaround in terms of the people who were coming in and the fact that he was able to do all these things that he did. To some extent it was a reflection of the fact that there was a solid base to begin with. But as these new people came in, they added a great deal of support and the kind of courage and intellectual aspects that was so necessary in that environment.

Q: We were talking about Vietnamization and the turnover. Did Captain Arbo run that, or did somebody else come in?

Captain Kerr: Captain Arbo left. And what happened was, Emmett Tidd was scheduled to relieve Arbo as the senior naval advisor. So it was decided that "Chick" Rauch would take over the job as senior naval advisor and move Emmett Tidd in as chief of staff. The chief of staff at that time was relieved early to make way for Emmett Tidd. He proved to be very solid.

Q: You mentioned that some problems cropped up in implementing the

concept. What sorts of problems?

Captain Kerr: Oh, the problems were mostly cultural. Differences when you put U.S. sailors on the same boat with Vietnamese, you get two different cultures coming together in a very small space. We anticipated that there would be these problems. We found out that the Marine Corps had done some work in this area. So we called to find out who it was that they had got to assist them in what you might call cultural training or whatever.

Because there were a lot of, mostly instructors, Vietnamese who were going to be with the United States Navy. And then what we envisioned was on the boats was kind of a sequential turnover. In other words, you would put one Vietnamese on and take one American off and then put a second Vietnamese on and take off a second American sailor and finally the third, and eventually they would be in charge of that boat. The boat would be theirs, and they would have the assets as well as the mission. You know, there were certain Americanization overtones, I think you might put it, from the trainees, and the interface between the USN and the VNN, the Vietnamese Navy, we saw it as being very critical to the success of this whole effort.

We located a fellow by the name of Bob Humphrey who was over at Bangkok at the time, and he was under contract to Commander U.S. Military Advisory Command Thailand at the time. He had worked in

Korea and in Turkey and with the Marines in I Corps. He had made a rather exhaustive study of the cross-cultural relationships and the resulting shocks and attitudinal barriers that developed when you bring two cultures together in an environment. So we asked him to come to Saigon and brief the admiral, which he did. He did a very convincing job. The thrust of it was how to take negative attitudes and turn them into positive attitudes so that you could speed up this whole process, and it doesn't get bogged down because of cultural differences and cultural misunderstandings and hangups.

So we came up with what was called the Personal Response Program-- "PRP," I guess it was. We got a couple of pilot programs going by putting some Vietnamese sailors aboard LSTs that were down in the Delta. We also sent quite a few Vietnamese off to Guam. The purpose was for communications training as well as just to see how it would work out. The response, I think, was enthusiastic. But there were differing opinions about the whole thing--in the ability of the Vietnamese to absorb all this training and to understand it. But I think more than, you know, going into the details of it, more than anything else what's instructive is there is an understanding of the-- you just can't go up to the Vietnamese Navy and strike a deal and say, "We're going to turn over these assets." You've got to understand that at that time that, although we'd been in the country in Vietnam since 1949, and we had been there in force since 1962 and we had a rear admiral in there as a senior advisor since, I guess, about '65,

we really hadn't gotten on much with an effort to train the Vietnamese to assume the responsibilities for replacing us in-country.

So, in an effort to implement the policy that the admiral wanted, an accelerated turnover to the Vietnamese, he recognized that the limitations and the effort to respond to those limitations, one was to understand the culture of the Vietnamese. Train the U.S. sailor before he came over about what to expect. You know, certain actions, certain mannerisms, their habits, et cetera, not to be hung up by those, and not to be surprised at how he reacts to things. You say you might expect one type of reaction and you get another, and you see that as negative. It might not be, because it's just in his culture how you react.

So a significant effort was made in this whole cultural area. I considered that to be also indicative of the type of commander Admiral Zumwalt was. He was willing to reach out and accept almost--or at least had an open mind to--almost any approach that had a chance of assisting us in working. You know, there are, I think, a lot of military people who would say, "Look, I'm not interested in a bunch of social scientists coming over here trying to tell me how to run this war."

Q: What was the initial staff reaction to the social scientists?

Captain Kerr: Well, some of the initial staff reaction was very

negative. In fact, one of the interesting ironies was that "Chick" Rauch's reaction was very negative. In fact, he's the one who told me that we didn't need a bunch of social scientists who were going to come over and show us how to run this war. He was a nuclear submariner, had been a systems analyst and was thinking mostly in quantitative terms and quantitative analysis. But he became the guy who was directing the effort and began to see that there was some real value to it, and it was very helpful.

Q: One of the criticisms of the Vietnamese all along was that they were unwilling to fight their own war. Did you have to overcome this reluctance?

Captain Kerr: Well, I don't think that the Vietnamese as individuals or the Navy that I knew of as an organization was afraid to fight their own war. They certainly had a lot of personal courage. The people that I got to know personally, I had great admiration for their willingness to fight for their country and their own personal courage. But you had to put it all in the context of Vietnamese politics, the overpowering presence of the U.S. military there. I think the Vietnamese Navy was eager to assume the responsibility. Certainly Admiral Tran Van Chon, who was the admiral's counterpart, the CNO of the Vietnamese Navy—there was certainly no reluctance, as I recall, on his part to work more with the Navy and to understand that this was

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basically their war and a willingness to assume the missions as well as the assets to fight that war with. I didn't see that on the Navy side and I think to accept that question, you really have to put it in the context of the total Vietnamese environment. There were a lot of things that were keeping some of those people from fighting for their own country.

Q: Anything else on the turnover that you want to say?

Captain Kerr: No, I don't think so. There are a lot of details about it which I've forgotten. Believe me, I worked with the admiral across the board, so once these decisions were made, the implementation of them we followed. I went to the briefings with him, but I never really got involved in the day-to-day details of it. Only in Charles Rauch, "Chick" Rauch, the admiral found a person that was as loyal and supportive as any person that he had in Vietnam. I have great admiration for that man and what he did. There was a guy that really had an open mind. Believe me, really a first-class person as well as a very talented naval officer.

Q: On SEA LORDS, who coined the acronym for that program or campaign?

Captain Kerr: Well, I believe it was Admiral Zumwalt. I remember he called me into his office one day. He was sitting there at his desk,

and he had a single pad of paper he was writing things down. He had "SEA" and "LORDS." Underneath the "S" he had "South." Under the "E," East," and the "A," "Asia." And under the "L" was "Land," "Ocean," "River," "Delta," "Strategy."

I remember he really liked that acronym, because it allowed him to call Bob Salzer "First Sea Lord." That only got us in trouble once, because the message traffic that was generated as a result of this operation we wanted to separate it from message traffic that normally went to Bob Salzer as Commander Task Force 117. We went to the communications systems and got his call sign "First Sea Lord" in the message traffic, so we could address traffic and it would go to that one portion of his staff that had been set up to deal with that message traffic. And one of them got routed to London sometime to the First Sea Lord.

Well, the SEA LORDS operation, as I recall, was an effort on the part of the admiral to bring together all of the task forces in Vietnam. He thought that we should be able to use the capability of the three different task forces--117, 116, and 115--to control a large part of the rivers and canals of the Delta. So, Bob Salzer and the staff worked together to put together this campaign which he called SEA LORDS.

Q: Was Salzer picked to head that because of the favorable impression he'd made during your tour?

Captain Kerr: Yes, plus Salzer had been more involved in the Delta effort. He had more experience. And he was just an impressive guy.

He was selected, and he and the members of the staff went together to put together what were the objectives and how to implement this. The objectives were, as I recall, to launch a campaign down the canal. It was called the Long Xuyen Canal, which was between the Bassac River and the Gulf of Thailand. And, at the same time, a similar campaign down the canal running parallel to it from an area called Rach Soi and Thanh An. The purpose was to interdict two major VC supply routes coming down the western side of the Delta.*

This campaign was launched by the armored boats of 117, which was Salzer's Mobile Riverine Force. And it was successful in opening up the canal and killing a number of VC and seizing a number of caches of ammunition. After a few days of this effort, the Vietnamese Marine Corps troops who had operated with these boats moved in in their armored boats to what was called the Three Sisters area in the western part of the Delta while the regional force troops took over the bank security of the canals. Shortly thereafter, that area became safe enough that they were able to turn over the patrol of the waterways to the lighter PBRs. So, in a sense, as the admiral used to describe it, you go in first with your battleships, then you come in with your lighter ships, and you establish your control and presence.

So 117 went in and secured. Then 116, the lighter PBR boats,

*VC--Viet Cong.

would come in and take over from them and establish the presence. And then these, in turn, would gradually be replaced by boats of the Vietnamese Navy in order to free the U.S. Navy boats for other duties. That was the plan. We found that the refugee families who had not been in their homes along those canals since Tet had been returning.* That's probably as good an indicator of the degree to which the effort was successful as anything.

Another objective of SEA LORDS was to blockade several islands in the Bassac River which the VC had been using as crossing points. When they were once blockaded, we introduced the regional forces to sweep through and to take out the VC. These operations were equally successful.

Then, of course, along with these interdiction efforts operations along the river and the canals which parallel the Cambodian border in the northernmost section of the western Delta. And these patrols were initiated and became involved in an awful lot of firefights with VC infiltrating into Vietnam. We had reports back that the VC had stopped the tax extortions, and we believed that this interdiction could be further improved and that that barrier could serve as a very significant effort of interdicting the supplies in the IV Corps, as well as assisting in pacification through the presence, control, et cetera, and extracting a price from them.

*Tet was a vigorous North Vietnamese offensive against South Vietnam in early 1968, so named because it coincided with the Vietnamese Tet holiday.

The other thing, of course, was the use of the Swifts in operating when we were out on the ocean in Market Time and bringing them in for incursions up the rivers. That was having a very significant impact in terms of the firefights that were being generated. I'll tell you the skippers on those boats, they loved that. It was probably the boldest action, really, of all the SEA LORDS efforts--the Swift boats coming up. There was some really remarkable episodes of heroism there. The admiral gave a direct order to Roy Hoffman, who was the commander, not to ride those boats in. He didn't want him killed. Roy Hoffman ignored the admiral's order and rode the first boat in every time his boats went in. He flat told the admiral that he couldn't order those young lieutenants in there without going in himself.

My recollections on the specifics of SEA LORDS are a little vague at this point, but, in general, you can see what it was. It was designed to take an aggressive posture in the Delta; to integrate all the forces; to apply pressure, presence; to extract a cost out of the enemy; to interdict his supply lines; to bring force to bear in areas and in a manner that hadn't been thought of and used before, i.e., the Navy presence. In the past, as I've said, we always thought of large troop movements. What Zumwalt basically did was say, "Abe, you haven't got a lot going in the Delta. Your troops are focused on other corps. I'm going to put the Navy and the Vietnamese Navy and the Vietnamese Marines in this war in the Delta." And that's what he

did. And that was SEA LORDS, and it was very successful.

The next effort he swung on around then, you see; the next one was Giant Slingshot. That was to do basically the same thing in the Parrot's Beak area.

Q: How much involvement was there from the other U.S. services in this?

Captain Kerr: I can't really answer that. I know that there was some involvement from the Army that was stationed in the Delta, and we got some air support from the Air Force.

Q: It sounds like this would have been an idea thing for the use of the Marine Corps. Was there any sense of trying to get them more involved?

Captain Kerr: Well, yes. There has always been the thought that the Marines should have been out of I Corps and down in IV Corps. That was more ideally suited to their operations. But the way the thing evolved over a number of years is what really drove where the Marine Corps was, as opposed to where they probably would have been had we been able to sit down a few years later and say, "Now, how do we really want to go about this?" Because the Marines were fighting basically an Army kind of operation up in I Corps. Everybody had

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their rice bowl, and they weren't going to give that up.

Q: How much personal involvement did Admiral Zumwalt have with the boat skippers?

Captain Kerr: Quite a bit. The pattern that the admiral fell into was to get up in the morning and come down for breakfast, get briefed during breakfast on what had happened the night before, what were the significant firefights, what were the significant events. Then we would head for the helo pad and go visit them that morning. That had just an enormous impact on those guys, because they had been in a firefight at 10:00 o'clock or midnight, and here was the boss from Saigon heloing in to talk to them about it at 9:00 o'clock that morning. Plus the admiral debriefed them, and he had firsthand information on what had happened.

Q: Which was a sort of contrast to the way Admiral Veth had been.

Captain Kerr: That's what I'm told, yes. That had not been his pattern. His pattern had been to be briefed by his staff by the message traffic. Well, Admiral Zumwalt was also briefed by his staff from message traffic, but he also went out and made his presence felt and debriefed the people himself personally.

Q: Did he ever bring them to Saigon for any purpose?

Captain Kerr: Yes, he did. A lot of times they would be brought up to Saigon following a significant battle. We'd debrief them in Saigon.

Q: You talk about rewarding these people with fitness reports and trying to get them good subsequent tours; what about personal decorations?

Captain Kerr: Well, of course, we did that. I always carried at least half a dozen to a dozen medals in my briefcase. I'd an odd thing to carry a briefcase out in the battlefield, but I carried a .38 revolver in there and medals.

The admiral never wore a weapon at all, in contrast to General Abrams. When General Abrams would go out in the field, he would get in his helicopter. His aide would get on, and he would have his M-16 and 16 grenades hanging on him.* They would have two gunships running shotgun with him. We eventually had a helo running shotgun, but hell, I didn't know how to fire a rifle, and the admiral didn't know how to fire a rifle. I carried this .38 revolver in the briefcase. In fact, I always had the first chamber empty, because I was afraid I might pull off a round accidentally. So, I only had five bullets in it.

*M-16--the standard rifle used by the Army and Marine Corps in the Vietnam War.

The admiral used to always sit on his flak jacket rather than put it on his body. He felt the flak jacket was of more value to him sitting on it than it was wearing it. But, anyway, when we would get to these locales, the admiral would pin medals on these guys that morning. Within 12 hours of their engagement, they would be standing out with fatigues on. He would pin them on T-shirts, dirty fatigues, anything. Of course, then I'd go back to Saigon and send down a list of people who had just gotten medals to the awards board.

Q: It certainly circumvented the normal procedure.*

Captain Kerr: Yes, just completely. We were pinning medals on guys. Some we didn't even have the authority to pin on.

Q: Such as the Silver Star?

Captain Kerr: The Bronze Star. No, we never did that with a Silver Star. Eventually the admiral got Bronze Star authority. When we got over there, he had authority for the Navy Commendation Medal; that was as high as he could award. But I used to catch an awful lot of flak from these guys' bosses out in the field, because we'd go to the

*The normal, official procedure calls for the proposed recipient's immediate superior in command to make award nominations, which are then evaluated and either approved or disapproved by those higher in the chain of command. Medals are customarily awarded after the evaluation and approval process has been completed, not before.

awards board and tell them that the admiral had just given this kid a Navy Commendation Medal that morning. And they would say, "What for?"

I'd say, "Contact his boss." They would contact his boss, and the first time his boss knew that the guy had gotten a Navy Commendation Medal was when the awards board called him from Saigon telling him that they needed the citation and all the supporting paperwork on it. But it had an enormous impact, an enormous impact. And, of course, you know, what you are after is the impact on the person in the field. You're not worried about how the bureaucracy reacts to it. So it was very favorable. These kids were involved. They were excited. They were scared. But they were taking the war to the enemy in the Delta, which they had never done before. And that's what SEA LORDS did.

Q: Who was in charge of tactics? This riverine warfare is essentially a new thing for the U.S. Navy, which has the blue sea tradition.

Captain Kerr: Well, it just grew up with the people who were in Vietnam. I don't think there was any office back in Washington that was in charge of riverine tactics. The amphibious command in San Diego, as I said, had--they were the sponsor and the owner of the assets. But, they hadn't done a lot of tactical thinking on it. There was a command up in Mare Island where they trained with the boats and probably did some tactical thinking there, but I think most

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of it just grew up with the people in Vietnam. Certainly Admiral Zumwalt's strategy for using them in the Delta in SEA LORDS was a significant and almost a watershed in terms of strategic use of riverine forces. Their presence had been there, but once again, as I said, they had become static. They had done that thing. Now we had to look for new ways to use those assets and make their presence felt. And that's what he did with SEA LORDS.

Q: Was Captain Salzer the man who ran it in the sense that he would say who would go when and where?

Captain Kerr: Yes. The admiral had named Salzer as the First Sea Lord. He was in charge of implementing that strategy. If there was a person in charge of the tactics, the day-to-day tactics, that was Bob Salzer.

Q: You mentioned one thing that had brought this up as the noninvolvement of the Navy was that there was a very low casualty rate. What was the result when the casualty rate jumped up?

Captain Kerr: Well, the casualty rate did go up. But, of course, the results were--we should put it the other way around, did the casualties go up when they became involved? Yes, they did. That was the price for involvement. But I think people understood that. If

you're going to go out and engage the enemy, you're going to take casualties.

Q: Was there any reluctance on the part of some people to do this?

Captain Kerr: I can't recall anything of that. Throughout the year, I used to have some of the young lieutenants come to town. I say some of the young lieutenants, hell at that time, that's what I was. And they'd sit down and talk to me about some of the conflicts they were having over the war, some of the orders they were given, and the problems they had in executing those orders. So it was a very difficult war.

You give a kid an order to go out on the river and anything that moves on that river is presumed to be the enemy, and all of a sudden he sees something moving and it's nothing more than a family, but his orders are to shoot anything that moves on the river, and he knows that's not the enemy. He has a real conflict. He has his responsibility, his loyalty to his commander and his commander's orders and authority on the one hand and the moral question that arises between himself and the potential victims of carrying out that order.

Q: Who established the rules of engagement?

Captain Kerr: Well, the rules of engagement were established by CinCPac and established by MACV. I don't think we had any authority to establish rules of engagement. I can't recall now. There may have been some local authority that Admiral Zumwalt had. But, for the most part, the rules of engagement were more of national policies than they were local military rules. I may be wrong on that, but I believe most rules were established at the DoD level, almost, so there was civilian input and control.* They had a lot of political overtones.

Q: What about dealing with disciplinary problems, drug use, et cetera?

Captain Kerr: I don't recall that at all as being a problem. I just can't recall drugs ever coming up in the naval forces. I'm sure we had people using drugs, but it never was a problem. Discipline was not a problem with the forces. Now, there would be people who would argue that we had a disciplinary problem because of the way people looked and, you know, the way they kept their boats. They weren't always spic and span, and you would hit those fire bases and they weren't always dressed out in starched khakis ready to meet you, but we didn't see that--or at least I never did and I don't think the admiral saw it as a problem of discipline. It was just people who had fallen into a modus operandi that an outsider might see as a lack of

*DoD--Department of Defense.

discipline. But these guys were very disciplined when it came time to execute their mission and go out and face a pretty dangerous enemy.

Q: Well, this is the way Admiral Salzer put it--you make a guy work a 14-hour day for seven days a week, and you tell him he's got to do the spit and polish on top of that; it's unrealistic.

Captain Kerr: Yes, that's true.

Q: I was wondering if you had some kind of feedback on morale.

Captain Kerr: In my judgment, morale shot up tremendously within the first couple of months. You had two big things happen, as I said. You had SEA LORDS and the success of that involvement shot morale up. On the advisory side you had movement for the first time in terms of Vietnamization. We were going to get off dead center. We were going to turn this thing over to the Vietnamese. We had a lot of initiatives going. People felt engaged, they felt involved, they felt needed, they felt a sense of accomplishment. The personality and leadership style of the admiral. He gave credibility to the Navy in-country. He gave us something to be proud of. He gave us status with our counterparts in the other services who now saw the Navy as an involved component of the whole effort in Vietnam. So morale went up enormously within the first couple of months of his taking command.

Q: I take it that General Abrams looked very favorably on these developments.

Captain Kerr: Absolutely. I think General Abrams was very, very pleased with Admiral Zumwalt and what he was doing.

Q: So he became sort of a fair-haired boy then?

Captain Kerr: Well, that's one way to put it. I think another way to put it is he became a very trusted and essential advisor to General Abrams and also a component commander whom the general looked to, not only for help in executing the admiral's mission, but also in supporting the general in executing his mission.

You know, a lot of people felt that once Zumwalt got over there, we finally had in-country probably the best assortment--assortment is not the right word--but the best collection, the most distinguished, capable, competent, simpatico group that had been in Vietnam since the whole damned thing started. Well, Brown, Zumwalt, and Abrams all became chiefs of staff of their services.* So you had a very, very talented group, a dedicated group--a group that worked well together. Plus, Cushman was up in I Corps at the time.** At one point, all four

*General George S. Brown, USAF, served as Commander Seventh Air Force, with jurisdiction over all Air Force operations in Southeast Asia, 1968-1970; Air Force Chief of Staff, 1973-1974; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1974-1978.

**General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., USMC, was Commanding General, Third Marine Amphibious Force in the I Corps area of South Vietnam, 1967-1969; Commandant of the Marine Corps, 1972-1975.

of those guys were sitting on the Joint Chiefs of Staff together. So, we had awfully good people. And Admiral Zumwalt began to draw a lot better group of people from the Navy. Plus, he began to get the Navy more interested in what was happening in country.

Q: So it sort of fed on itself, I would think, as far as positive momentum.

Captain Kerr: Oh yea, there is no question. The admiral had to work through the Navy system to get the support. We didn't have any budget. We didn't own any assets. It all came from the commanders in the Pacific. The admiral did everything he could to get these people to support him and to understand and to see what he considered to be an important dimension to the war in Vietnam. And some of them stalled on that and weren't willing to get on board, if you will.

So General Abrams merely shot those requests up through his channels to the JCS, and they'd get approved there, and they'd come back down the Navy side. So they would be sitting on Zumwalt's ideas or his requests or his initiative or his recommendations, and they would come down as an order from the JCS. It didn't take long before people, as I said, people began to come to Saigon seeking out Admiral Zumwalt.

I remember one night Vice Admiral Smith got me aside and appealed to me to make sure the admiral understood that he was really on his

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team and wasn't fighting him.* That same admiral, a couple of months earlier, didn't even bother to come over to see Admiral Zumwalt when he was in country. I guess that's a fairly good indicator of how things were changing, and what sort of impact he was having on the war effort in Saigon. .

*Vice Admiral John Victor Smith, USN, Commander Amphibious Force Pacific Fleet.