

The Navy in the Vietnam War: An Editor's Observations

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Pendant la guerre du Vietnam, les Etats-Unis possédaient une des armes stratégiques les plus puissantes du monde, la puissance navale. Presque tout le soutien logistique de l'ennemi est entré au Vietnam du Nord par la mer à bord de navires envoyés de l'Union Soviétique et de Chine jusqu'à Haïphong, le port maritime de Hanoï. Les forces autant aériennes que sous-marines et de surface de la marine américaine auraient eu la tâche facile de couler ces navires avec missiles, torpilles et autres mines. Le Président Lyndon Johnson et ses conseillers, cependant, ont répugné à employer la marine de cette façon. De procéder ainsi aurait pris un risque calculé de conflit élargi avec l'Union Soviétique et la Chine, un risque que le Président Johnson était peu disposé à prendre. Le présent article, une dissertation analytique, scrute les erreurs provoquées en ce qui concerne la marine américaine.

The war in Vietnam was difficult and it went on for a long time. The conditions under which the Americans tried to fight it, afloat, aloft, and ashore, were peculiar. Though our focus here is on the Navy's efforts to overcome its share of those peculiar conditions, perhaps I can best illustrate some of those conditions by beginning with a little experience I had early in 1966. This involved being in all three environments, aloft, ashore, and afloat, as well as being with both our forces and those of South Vietnam.

I flew from Saigon near the southern end of South Vietnam to Da Nang, near the northern end, in an Air Force C-123 cargo plane. We made several stops along the way. Each time, the pilot flew high and, at the last possible moment, descended steeply to the air field. This was to keep the aircraft safe from enemy fire. Keep in mind that this was well inside the country the United States had come to help by repelling an invasion from the outside.

At Da Nang, headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force, I asked to go to Chu Lai, about 50 miles to the south, where the Marines and Seabees (Navy construction engineers) had built an expeditionary airfield on the beach. There I wished to talk to Colonel Oscar Peatross, commanding officer, Seventh Marine Regimental Landing Team. The previous August this force had fought and won the first American regimental-sized battle against the enemy. The enemy force, also a regiment, was located at the Van Tuong peninsula, a few miles south of Chu Lai, and U.S. intelligence believed it had intended to attack the new Marine air base there. Peatross's battle had devastated the Viet Cong regiment, and therefore, the attack on the base did not take place. Since I had asked

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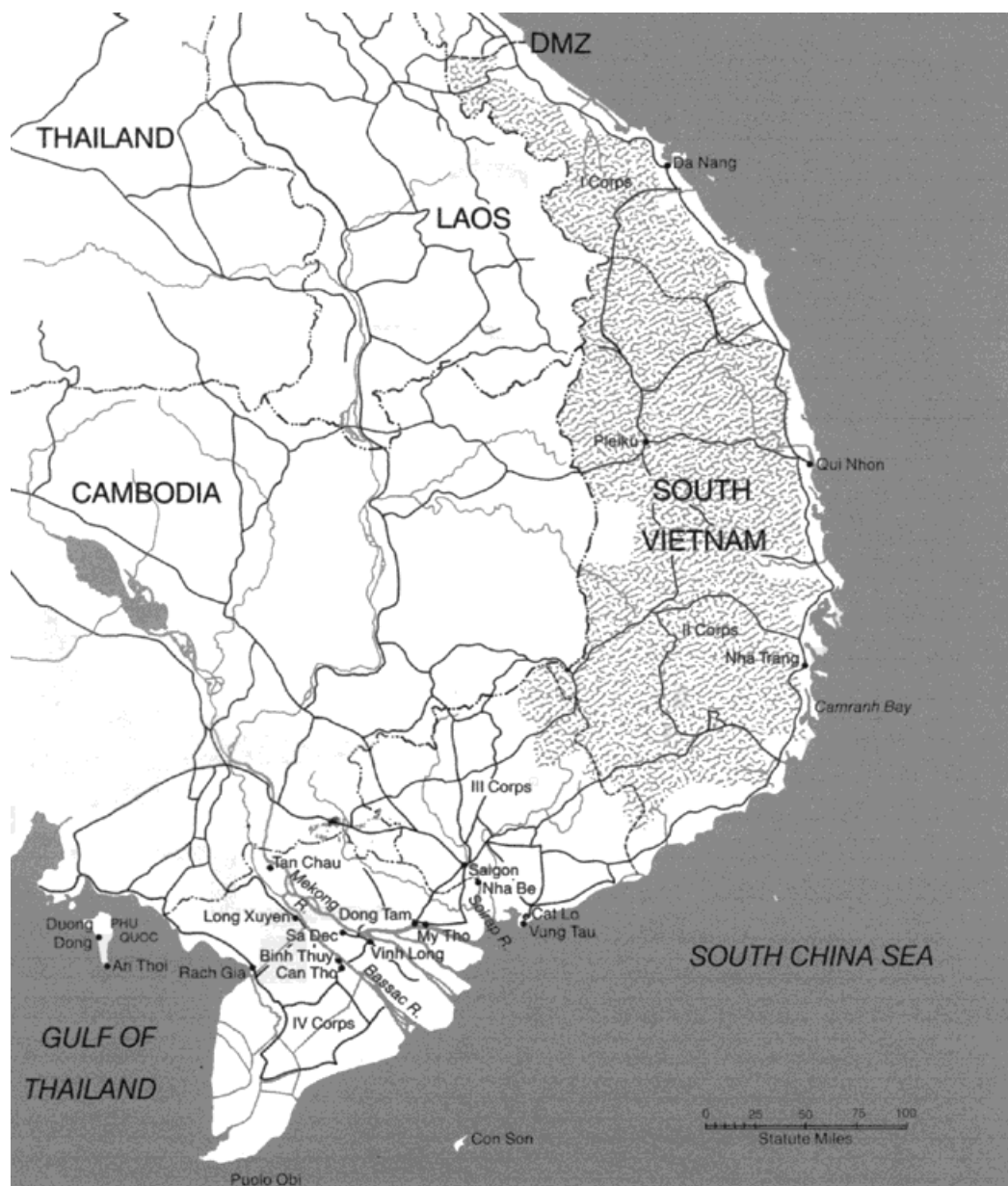


Illustration 1: South Vietnam.

Courtesy Naval Institute Press.

Peatross to write about the battle for the U. S. Naval Institute, I wished to understand some matters not yet clear to me before we published his account of the action.¹

¹ O.F. Peatross, "Application of Doctrine: Victory at Van Tuong Village," *Naval Review* 1967 (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1966) reprinted in Frank Uhlig, Jr., *Vietnam: The Naval Story* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 157-170. From 1962 through 1969 the hard-back *Naval Review* was published annually. Beginning in 1970, with a hard

I had imagined that since only 50 miles separated Chu Lai from Da Nang, there would be plenty of trucks going singly or in convoy between the two places. Wrong! There were no trucks, no vehicles of any kind, driving between the two strongholds. This astounding fact arose from a simple condition: The enemy controlled the territory between Da Nang and Chu Lai and, in particular, Vietnam's main north-south highway, Route 1. Da Nang kept its dependency at Chu Lai alive mainly by sea, using the Navy's flat-bottomed Landing Ships Tank (LST) and Landing Craft Utility (LCU), though people were more likely to go between one place and another by air. So I went the 50 miles by Marine C-130 aircraft. After Colonel Peatross and his staff had described the battle to me and cleared up my questions, they asked what else they could do for me. I asked, "Can we see the battlefield?" Their response was to ask me how I wanted to see it, "from the ground or from the air?" I asked: "What is the difference?" Their answer was that the enemy controlled that territory, too. I chose to do the tour by air. The big revelation to me, however, was that, while we had won the battle, it was the enemy who held the land. Thus, despite the presence of South Vietnamese troops not far away who might have taken advantage of the Marines' success, they did not do so. So the enemy, not the government we had come to help, still had control of the land and the people.

I then called on a couple of young U. S. naval officers assigned as advisors to a South Vietnamese command, Junk Group 15, at a base nestled between the Marines and a nearby river, the Truong. The land across the river to the north was hostile, and the mission of the junks was to patrol the waters of the South China Sea off that hostile land. However, the advisors told me, rather than patrol to the north as ordered, the junks usually headed south, to the waters off the Marine base, where they were not likely to see anything they did not want to see. "Can we make a patrol?" I asked. The answer was that, though the advisors were not on speaking terms with the CO of the junk group whom they were supposed to be advising, they thought it could be arranged. As dusk settled in, the two advisors and I gathered up everything we would need for a 12-hour patrol in a primitive 50-foot craft manned by men with whom we could neither share a meal nor even talk. The language, I should add, in which the commanding officer and his American "advisors" were not speaking to each other was French.

When we arrived at the boats, none was ready for us, but after a lot of jabber, one was provided. It was dark now. We cast off, and sailed, not out to sea, but up the river. There we spotted another junk supposedly on patrol, though she was moored to a stake. After a long conversation between the boat crews we got underway again and proceeded up river. Rivers and coastal waters in Vietnam were off limits at night to everyone except those,

cover for those who asked for one, the *Naval Review* continued, but also served as the May issue of the U. S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*. I was editor of this annual work until late 1981 when I accepted an offer from the Naval War College in Newport, R. I. The aims of my visits to Vietnam were to find out what the naval services were doing there, who was doing those things, what should be written about, and who should be asked to do the writing. This led to 22 substantial articles on what those services were doing, usually written by an officer in a command or responsible staff billet. Fifteen of these were republished in *Vietnam, the Naval Story*. For a recent account of this action, see Otto J. Lehrack, *The First Battle: Operation Starlight and the Beginning of the Blood Debt in Vietnam* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2004).

such as fishermen, who had permits to be there. A boat with a permit had to indicate her presence with a white light on a mast. Ahead we counted sixteen boats, or sampans, but only fifteen lights. As we approached, the boat without a light separated herself from the others. Clearly, she was hostile. Did we pursue her? We did not. We ignored her. But a Marine Corps amphibious vehicle coming out of the darkness from astern charged after the enemy. I do not know how that venture ended. What we did was to round up the other fifteen boats, those with lights on. We had all the fishermen come on board, examined their papers, and allowed all but four of them to return to their boats, though by the time the examination was over, some of those sampans had drifted off into the night. The four men we kept were trussed up and tossed into a corner. At that point the boat's cox'n decided the patrol was over, and back to base we went. It was about 10 o'clock. As we arrived at the base the field telephone in the advisors' hut was ringing. The Marines had heard shooting at the junk base and sent a patrol to investigate. They found, to their surprise, that we were not present. Perhaps not to their surprise, the junk group commanding officer denied to them that there had been any shooting. When the advisors had cleared up the matter of our recent absence with the Marine on the other end of the line, one of the advisors and I turned in. The other, though stretched out, was wide awake, fully dressed, and armed. During the night the two would take turns that way. Why was this? A few months beforehand, when the base had been on the northern side of the river, away from the Marines, it had come under Viet Cong attack. Someone inside opened the gate. The Viet Cong rushed in and killed the two American advisors then present. Though the base had now been moved to a safer place, no one knew, or no one admitted to knowing, who had opened the gate. He -- or --they --were still there.

The next morning I left for Da Nang. Or, I thought that was what I would be doing. What I really did was to wait in a hangar for eight hours before a C-130 was ready to make the 50-mile flight. This was a speed of advance by four-engine aircraft of six or seven knots. The general conditions this series of small events illustrate are these: First, wherever they were, the Americans were effectively on an island--usually a well-fortified island, from which they could emerge in powerful array as occasion required, or offered--but to which they always had to return.² Second, battles won did not mean territory won. For that reason, no matter who won the battle, the population under enemy control before

² Credit for this insight belongs to Captain Herbert T. King, USN, who, in 1967, was Commander Naval Support Activity Saigon. His piece, "Naval Logistic Support, Qui Nhon to Phu Quoc," appeared originally in *Naval Review 1969* and was republished in *Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 449-477. Captain King's observation, on p. 473, was "nearly every base supported by NSA Saigon, was, in effect, on an island, for overland communications were almost nonexistent." NSA Saigon supported every naval base in South Vietnam except those in I Corps, which were the responsibility of NSA Da Nang. The local geography was part of the problem. The other part was that the enemy controlled most of the territory between any two U. S. bases. As King wrote in the same piece (466), "Occasionally men from a Delta base would join Army units in convoy for limited resupply from Saigon, but only after careful security arrangements, including air cover, had been made. The narrow, potholed road running the eight miles between Saigon and Nha Be was the lone overland route considered relatively secure-- and that only during daylight hours."

the battle remained under enemy control after the battle. And third, the Saigon government's armed forces did not necessarily favor the same government as that for which our forces were fighting. Under such conditions it is not possible for foreign armed forces to win a war for a local government.

Some might argue that the conditions I describe were peculiar to the time and place where these events occurred. But that same year I saw essentially the same conditions at the other end of the country, in the south. In the following year, 1967, I saw that those conditions were still present. I did not go to Vietnam after that, and so must depend for my information on the same sources most other people do. In light of my listening to, and reading the work of, others, I do not think those conditions changed.

Both North and South Vietnam had enough men in their populations to field good-sized armies. The difference between the two, as illustrated above, was that while the fighting men of the North believed in their assigned task of uniting North and South under Ho Chi Minh's rule, only some of those in the South believed in their assigned task of defending the South's independence from the North. Rather, many people in the South favored the North. The most active of these were the Viet Cong, and they were armed and responsive to Ho's directives. By 1965 the Viet Cong were beating the South's armed forces. It appeared that if the United States wanted South Vietnam to retain its independence from Ho Chi Minh's communist rule, this country would have to send its own forces to do the job. And so we did: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force. They were all there.

Let me lay before you a proposition: Almost the entire naval share of the Vietnam War had to do with logistics--ours, as well as the enemy's. For our purposes, logistics means getting everybody, and everything, to where needed, when needed. Indeed, so far as it was in the power of the U. S. Navy to affect the course of the war in our favor, it lay in how well this navy managed both to strangle the flow of enemy forces and arms to battlefields ashore and to protect the flow of our forces and arms to those same battlefields.

Neither North nor South Vietnam had an arms industry. All the weapons used by each, their ammunition, and their supporting equipment, had to come from elsewhere. So did all their fuel. Thus, the United States armed and supplied not only our own forces, but also those of South Vietnam. All those arms and supplies crossed the Pacific Ocean, mainly in American merchant ships, ships that were American owned, American manned, and American flagged. Until they entered South Vietnamese waters, no enemy forces menaced those ships. So our merchantmen steamed toward Vietnam independently, likely without ever seeing an American warship. This happened because the U. S. Navy so dominated the Pacific Ocean that no warship of an unfriendly nation dared to come anywhere near an American merchant ship.

Like South Vietnam, North Vietnam also had a distant patron: the Soviet Union. China, too, supplied some arms and equipment to North Vietnam. But China and its arms industry were much poorer in those days, and much more backwards, than the Soviet Union and its arms industry. Moreover, China was undergoing its own internal struggle, called the "Cultural Revolution," which for years on end tore the country apart. At first

the Soviets shipped their arms to Vietnam by rail through China. But China stole much for herself because, despite her internal turmoil, she was preparing to begin her own war against the Soviet Union, a war over boundaries. So the Soviets shifted nearly all their traffic destined for North Vietnam from railroad trains to ships. Though the Soviets and Chinese also sent their client a small number of military specialists, such as railroad repair units and crews for the air defense missile batteries they had shipped in, unlike the United States they sent no armies, no air forces, no fleets. They had no need to.



Illustration 2: The Gulf of Tonkin and North Vietnam.

Courtesy of Naval Institute Press

It was by sea, then, through waters dominated by the powerful U. S. fleet, that the Soviets supplied Ho Chi Minh with trucks, rifles, machine guns, land mines, field artillery, rockets, tanks, antiaircraft guns, Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs), MIGs (Soviet fighter aircraft), and all the fuel, spare parts, and ammunition they needed. The U. S. Pacific Fleet did not interfere with that shipping. President Lyndon Johnson would not allow that. By denying the U. S. fleet the authority to halt all sea traffic in and out of North Vietnam's ports, chief of which was Haiphong, the President of the United States came close to putting his own navy out of business and, thereby, made the jobs of the other American and South Vietnamese forces ashore and aloft even more difficult and more dangerous than they would otherwise have been. Perhaps he made it impossible for them to succeed, though, as we have shown, other forces were working to the same end. Why did President Johnson make such a decision? The answer to that lay in Moscow.

Before his ouster by the Politburo in October 1964, Premier Nikita Khrushchev must have foreseen what would become the Soviet Union's urgent interest in transporting arms, ammunition, and supplies to North Vietnam by sea rather than sending them by rail through China. That shrewd politician led the American ambassador in Moscow, and reporters there, too, to believe that a U. S. invasion of North Vietnam, or a blockade of North Vietnam's seaports, would have unpleasant consequences, such as-- perhaps-- a repeat of the 1948 siege of West Berlin, or the escort by Soviet combat ships of Haiphong-bound freighters and tankers, or maybe something much worse.³ Khrushchev's grim threat outlasted his grip on power by many years. Clearly impressed, President Johnson and his principal advisors wanted no war with the Soviet Union. We had barely avoided such a disaster only a few years before over Soviet nuclear-tipped missiles which were being sent to Cuba by sea. The thought of replaying that Cuban scenario in Southeast Asian waters, with Soviet fighting ships once again on scene, must have had a part in leading the White House to reject resolutely any and all proposals to close North Vietnamese ports to Soviet shipping; moreover, if Soviet shipping were not to be barred, neither could we bar any other country's shipping. Haiphong was to stay open to all. With the U. S. Navy denied its most effective weapon, North Vietnam and its supporters had the same freedom of the seas as did South Vietnam and its supporters. In this fashion, without sending any of his warships into harm's way, Premier Khrushchev won the only major naval victory of the war in Vietnam. His was a great strategic achievement.⁴

³ Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1987), 46-47.

⁴ John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, Ill.: Elephant Paperbacks, 1998; first published 1995). Prados reports (265-266) on White House discussions about mining in 1967 and later. For example, he quotes a Central Intelligence Agency prediction on 13 March 1968 that "the mining of Haiphong would offer a clear challenge to the Soviet Union. Of all actions other than invasion of North Vietnam, mining would be most likely to cause the Soviets to consider serious acts of retaliation against the U. S. On the same page (266), Prados quotes Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford telling a Senate committee on 17 September 1968 that "if you mine Haiphong . . . the Soviet freighter comes in there and hits a mine and goes down, and President Johnson is concerned he has a bigger war on his hands . . ." As did others on earlier occasions, Clifford also expressed doubts as to the

Once Ho Chi Minh had the necessary arms and other materials in his country, how did he get them to his forces fighting in the South? He sent the men and supplies for his forces in the northern and inland provinces of South Vietnam by an overland route through the Laotian mountains and jungles. This was called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Originally this was a hodge-podge of paths through mountains and the often sodden wilderness, but later, despite an enormous tonnage of bombs dropped by the Americans, Ho's engineers turned it into a dirt road. In time they turned parts of it into a paved road.⁵ Ho sent supplies intended for the Viet Cong along the coast and in South Vietnam's southern provinces in a fleet of small steel freighters, craft resembling trawlers. These vessels, each carrying fifty or a hundred tons of cargo, sailed to prearranged rendezvous in coves and inlets where the local Viet Cong could unload the cargo and send the craft back for more.⁶

The American response to our great failure to halt the flow of Soviet supplies into Haiphong came in five parts:

1. "Rolling Thunder." This was the name given to the Air Force and Seventh Fleet's bombing campaign against the southward flow of arms along the Ho Chi Minh Trail as well as against North Vietnam's airfields, military headquarters, barracks, supply dumps, and ammunition depots.
2. "Sea Dragon." This was another Seventh Fleet effort, aimed at halting or crippling Ho Chi Minh's logistical support of enemy forces in South Vietnam by means of junks and other small craft sailing unobtrusively down North Vietnam's coast and ultimately to a rendezvous on South Vietnam's coast. Most often the U.S. force involved was a pair of destroyers, though sometimes there were more destroyers or even a cruiser assigned to the task.
3. "Market Time." This was a U. S. naval blockade of South Vietnam, the country we were supposed to be helping, with the aim of halting the flow of arms

effectiveness of any U. S. mining effort. For President Johnson's reaction in November 1965 when, during his only wartime meeting with his joint chiefs of staff, the chairman, General Earl Wheeler, proposed (and, at Wheeler's request, others expanded on the theme), that the approaches to Haiphong be mined, see Charles O. Cooper's "The Day it Became the Longest War," U. S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (May 1996),77-80.

- 5 See Richard L. Stevens, *The Trail: A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Role of Nature in the War in Vietnam* (New York:, N.Y.: Garland, 1993), 98, 104, 165; and John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York:, N.Y.: John Wiley, 1998). In Prados, see especially 374: "About a million *bo dais* made the trek South. Tonnage moving along the trail grew from a hundred tons a week in 1963 to over ten thousand tons in 1970." A *bo dai* was a North Vietnamese soldier. The huge increase in tonnage moved down the Trail between the earlier year and the later reflected the change in the North Vietnamese army from essentially a guerrilla outfit to a conventional force. That army operated mainly in the neighborhood of the demilitarized zone, or DMZ. In the southern part of South Vietnam, the enemy remained the Viet Cong.
- 6 James A. Hodgman, "Market Time in the Gulf of Thailand," *Naval Review 1968*, reprinted in *Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 308-343. See 308-310, 339-341. See also Stevens, *Th Trail*, 55, 59, and Prados, *The Blood Road*, 14, 17-18, 111, 195- 299.

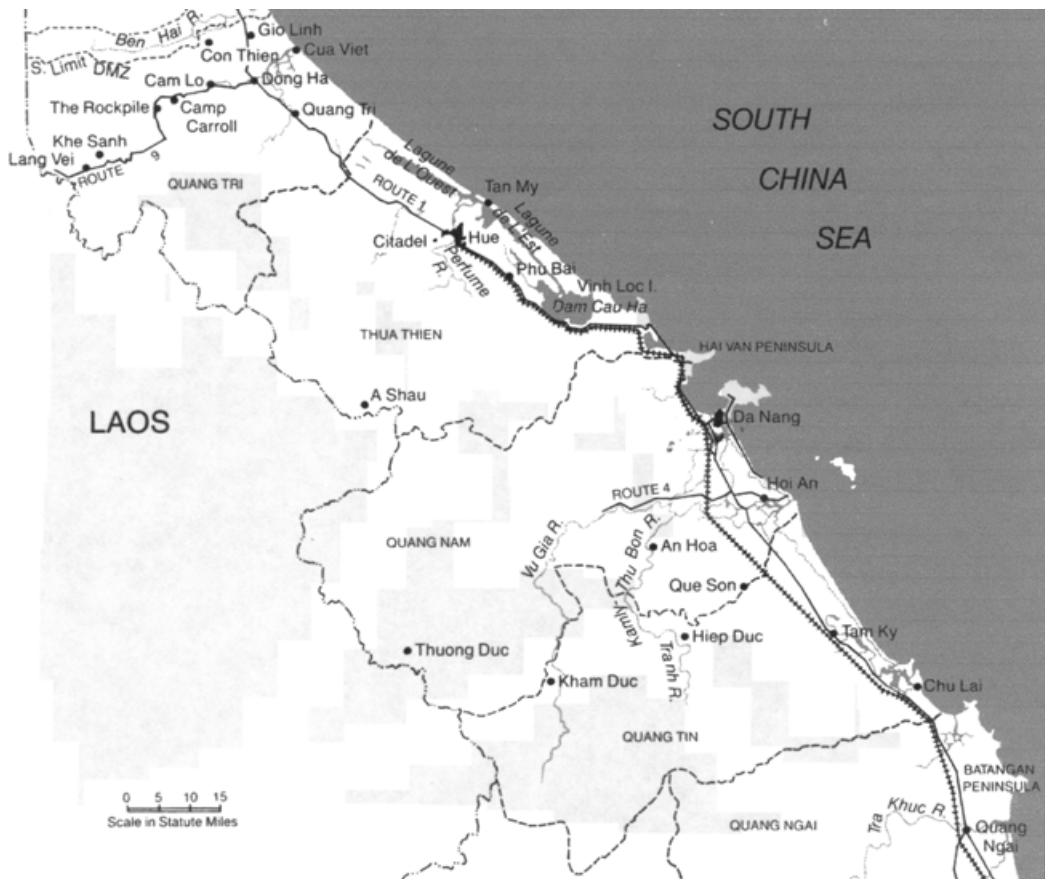


Illustration 3: South Vietnam and the long coast where “Market Time” operations took place. Courtesy of Naval Institute Press.

into South Vietnam in the holds of those junks and small enemy freighters. Market Time's outer screen consisted of patrol planes -- most commonly the Lockheed P-2 -- which flew long patrols at low levels some fifty or a hundred miles at sea. A second screen consisted of small seagoing surface ships patrolling singly about forty miles off shore. Most commonly the ships used were DERs, World War II destroyer escorts modified in the 1950s to serve as early-warning radar picket ships for continental air defense. The best ships available for this task, however, were the Coast Guard's high-endurance cutters, which were bigger than the DERs, better sea boats, and more heavily armed. The final, or inshore, screen consisted eventually of about eighty hastily-acquired fifty-foot "Swift boats." The Swifts were fast but short-ranged, and were very hard on their crews, which meant that a lot of them were needed to cover a small area. The Coast Guard supplied 26 of their 82-foot cutters for the same task. These were comparatively long-ranged, sea-kindly boats, which permitted them to stay at sea longer than the Swifts could, and in worse weather, but they were slower than the Swifts and drew six feet, compared to the Swifts' 4.5 feet, which meant that the

Swifts could operate in waters the 82-footers could not enter.

4. "Game Warden." This was another naval effort, partly aimed at halting the flow of hostile arms after they had gotten into South Vietnam, along and across the enormous number of rivers, creeks, and canals in the heavily populated Mekong Delta in the extreme south. This part of the country was also known as "IV Corps Tactical Zone." Game Warden's other aim was to protect the flow of American arms and supplies borne in seagoing freighters on the last part of their long voyage from the United States. Saigon was South Vietnam's main seaport. All ships bound thereto had to pass up the narrow Long Tao River that for 20 miles or so wound through a Viet Cong stronghold, a mangrove swamp called the Rung Sat, or "Forest of Assassins." From hideouts along the river banks, the Viet Cong fired rockets at ships passing through the stream or exploded mines as the ships passed over them. Their objective was to sink those ships in the channel and thus halt all the seaborne traffic that kept Saigon's civil and military populations alive and functioning.

5. In response to the advance in 1964 of regular North Vietnamese troops into the northern provinces of South Vietnam, the area called "I Corps Tactical Zone," and in particular to guard the big air base at Da Nang, in March 1965 the U.S. Seventh Fleet landed a battalion of Marines at that port city. The Marines were the first U. S. combat elements in I Corps. Eventually, this country was to commit more than two Marine divisions, a very large Marine air wing, and several army divisions to the defense of I Corps. The Marines were unprepared to support themselves ashore for any length of time or at any distance inland. The army had troops skilled at those lines of work and, crucially, at building and operating a military seaport out of nearly nothing. But almost all those troops were in the reserve or the National Guard and, in the Vietnam War those troops were never called up. Who then, was to build that port and, after building, operate it or, as it turned out, operate it while still building it? The answer was the Navy. The Navy created and operated what it called Naval Support Activity Da Nang (NSA Da Nang). This was a huge undertaking and a great achievement.⁷

When the Marines deployed southward to Chu Lai and beyond, and northward to the demilitarized zone (DMZ), that is to the artificial border between North and South Vietnam, it turned out that, as elsewhere including Chu Lai, the enemy controlled most of the territory between American bases. This meant that, from the start, the enemy also controlled our land lines of communication. Some of what was needed to keep those deployed forces alive and functioning could go by air. Most went by sea, up and down the coasts and as far into the rivers as it was possible to sail. Open, self-propelled lighters, 135-foot LCUs, made the voyages when the weather allowed, and 327-foot LSTs from World War II did it in good weather and bad. Captain K. P. Huff, who commanded NSA Da Nang during its formative period, tells us that "war materials were kept flowing by

⁷ K. P. Huff, "Building the Advanced Base at Da Nang," *Naval Review 1968 and Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 175-201. See also Frank C. Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps," *Naval Review, 1971 and Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 202-227.

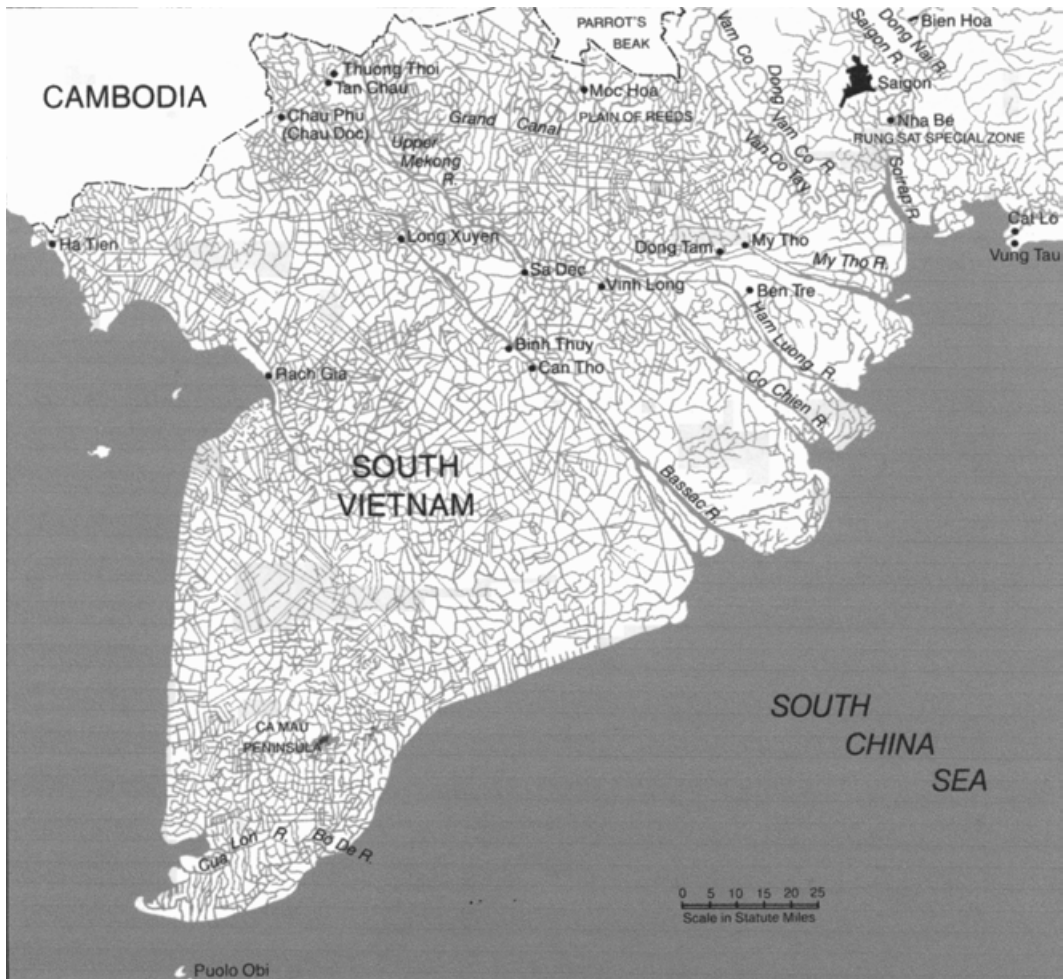


Illustration 4: I Corps Tactical Zone where Naval Support Activity Da Nang operated
 Courtesy of Naval Institute Press.

men who surf-boarded their LSTs through the 10- and 15-foot breakers into the mouth of the river where others of his men had built an unloading ramp so Chu Lai could be kept supplied.”⁸ One cargo-laden LST, the USS *Mahnomen* County (LST 912) arrived off Chu Lai when the weather was too rough to pass through the breakers. She waited outside for better weather. But her anchor chain parted, and the ship was hurled onto the rocks, a total loss.⁹

Those LCUs and smaller craft that sailed up the Perfume River to the old imperial capital of Hue, and up the Cua Viet River just below the DMZ in order to support the Marines there, were met by North Vietnamese rockets, mines, and fire from machine guns and artillery. The Navy responded with some of the river gunboats,

⁸ Huff, *Vietnam*, 193.

⁹ Collins, *Vietnam*, 217-218.

minesweeping boats, and helicopters that had been fighting at the southern end of the country, while Marine patrols scoured the banks. This was a struggle between determined antagonists that lasted as long as the Marines stayed in I Corps.¹⁰ All of these campaigns, large and small, were necessary to a great extent because of our attempt to fight a war against an enemy whose main supply line we dared not cut. How did they work out?

Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was conducted by the U. S. Air Force and the Seventh Fleet under many presidentially-imposed handicaps, all of which had their roots in the same soil in which Johnson's refusal to blockade North Vietnam's ports took life: fear that a local war into which, reluctantly, he had committed this country, could escalate uncontrollably into a new world war with nuclear-armed powers on both sides. The Air Force worsened the problem because it had only a single solution to all military problems. This solution was to destroy by bombing an assortment of military and industrial resources, the loss of which, so it was believed, would destroy the enemy's capacity and will to fight.¹¹

Without solutions or theories of its own on the conduct of aerial war over land, the Navy followed the Air Force's lead. But, as we have seen, the North Vietnamese had no modern means of transportation, few modern military resources, and no military industry. What the North Vietnamese did have, though, was a good Soviet-supplied air defense system which the Soviets improved enormously by shipping in modern surface-to-air missile launchers and guidance systems manned by Soviet troops upon whom the American aviators were forbidden to shoot. The situation, then, was that while there was little on the ground that American forces were allowed to engage or was worth bombing, in the air there were a great many worthwhile targets at which the Soviet and North Vietnamese gun and missile crews were always allowed to shoot. The result for us was an expensive defeat. We lost hundreds of airplanes, hundreds of pilots and air crewmen, and most of the men, weapons, ammunition, and supplies the enemy sent southward reached their intended destinations. At the end of March 1968, President Johnson ended his unfortunate aerial campaign over North Vietnam. Though the attack on the Ho Chi Minh Trail continued, it never achieved much. The bombing of the North was not to be resumed for four years, and then by a different president, though one who had few useful instruments of persuasion upon which he could call.

At first, Sea Dragon was confined to the southernmost thirty miles of North

¹⁰ Collins, *Vietnam*, 205-206, 213-214, 223-224. See also S. A. Swartrauber, "River Patrol Relearned," *Naval Review 1970* and *Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 365-411.

¹¹ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 208-209. See also Malcolm W. Cagle, "Task Force 77 in Action off Vietnam," in *Naval Review 1972* and *Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 14-72. Vice Admiral Cagle's assessment of the three years in which "Rolling Thunder" was in effect (early 1965 through early 1968) was that "the damage to the enemy had certainly been heavy. In those 37 months the enemy had not won a major ground battle. He had certainly not succeeded in subjugating South Vietnam by force. On the other hand, we had not forced him to halt his aggression. We had forced him to the peace table, but we had not forced him to make peace."

Vietnam's coastline. Later its scope was expanded, but never so far as to come within fifty miles of the main port of Haiphong. Dr. Edward J. Marolda of the Naval Historical Center describes what the enemy did soon after Sea Dragon began to attack the enemy's coastal traffic: "the Communists developed less costly and more efficient means for supplying their forces in the South. Beginning in December 1966, and with the tacit agreement of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian head of state, the enemy began using the port of Sihanoukville (since renamed Kompong Som) in the supposedly neutral country as a secure trans-shipment point for munitions destined for the Mekong Delta battleground. In addition, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had become a well-established supply network that sustained Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units in the I and II Corps Tactical Zones."¹²

There were not many supply junks running southward from Northern ports for the Seventh Fleet to sink. It was, in any event, a dubious venture, for how do the people in a destroyer (or cruiser) find out what any particular junk might be carrying except by coming right alongside and sending boarders over to investigate, just as the Market Time and Game Warden sailors did farther south? Sea Dragon, however, fired often on truck traffic moving on the coastal road, "Route 1" (which, south of the border, was as we have seen effectively under Viet Cong control). Sea Dragon ships also fired on bridges within range of their guns, but only a battleship fired shells heavy enough to destroy such structures. To be sure, there was such a ship present, the *New Jersey* (BB 62), but she was in Vietnamese waters for only a month in 1968 and never returned. The North Vietnamese placed some of the excellent Soviet 130 milli-meter field pieces that had come in through Haiphong at points on the shore where they expected the American ships to appear. These guns outranged most of those the Americans had, both ashore and afloat. Despite field artillery's inability to train as quickly as ships' guns do, from time to time they scored hits on their foes. In December 1966, for example they hit the *O'Brien* (DD 725) three times.¹³ Under fire, the ships maneuvered and fired back. Even when there were no hits on either side the gunners ashore came out ahead, for they prevented the naval gunners from achieving their true purpose, the destruction of the enemy's trucks and boats. In October 1968 Sea Dragon was closed down, two years after it began. In general, one is led to wonder whether the validity of the opinion attributed to Nelson that "a ship's a fool to fight a fort" did not long outlive him.

At first, Market Time, the U.S. blockade of a formally friendly coast, succeeded. After it began, our aircraft, ships, and boats captured, sank, or scared away, every enemy supply vessel trying to make the South Vietnamese coast. But then the enemy outflanked us. As we have just seen, he did this by shifting the destination of his supply boats from

¹² Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air and Land: An Illustrated History of the U. S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia*. (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 76-78, 112-113, 137, 141, 143, 161.

¹³ Conversations with John B. Hattendorf and Robert K. Reilly, both professors at the Naval War College. Prof. Hattendorf was a surface line officer in the *O'Brien* (DD 725), Prof. Reilly the same in the *Coney* (DD 508) and the *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5). Marolda, 77, shows what appears to be a perfect enemy straddle (two splashes over, two under) on the heavy cruiser *St. Paul* (CA 73), which was armed with long-range 8-inch guns.

secret rendezvous on South Vietnam's coast to the supposedly neutral Cambodian port of Sihanoukville, just to the west of IV Corps area. This was much better for the enemy than his old practice of landing the cargo on a beach. Sihanoukville had a pier, it could handle larger vessels than trawlers, and it had easy access by road and by river into South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese army established fourteen supply bases in southeastern

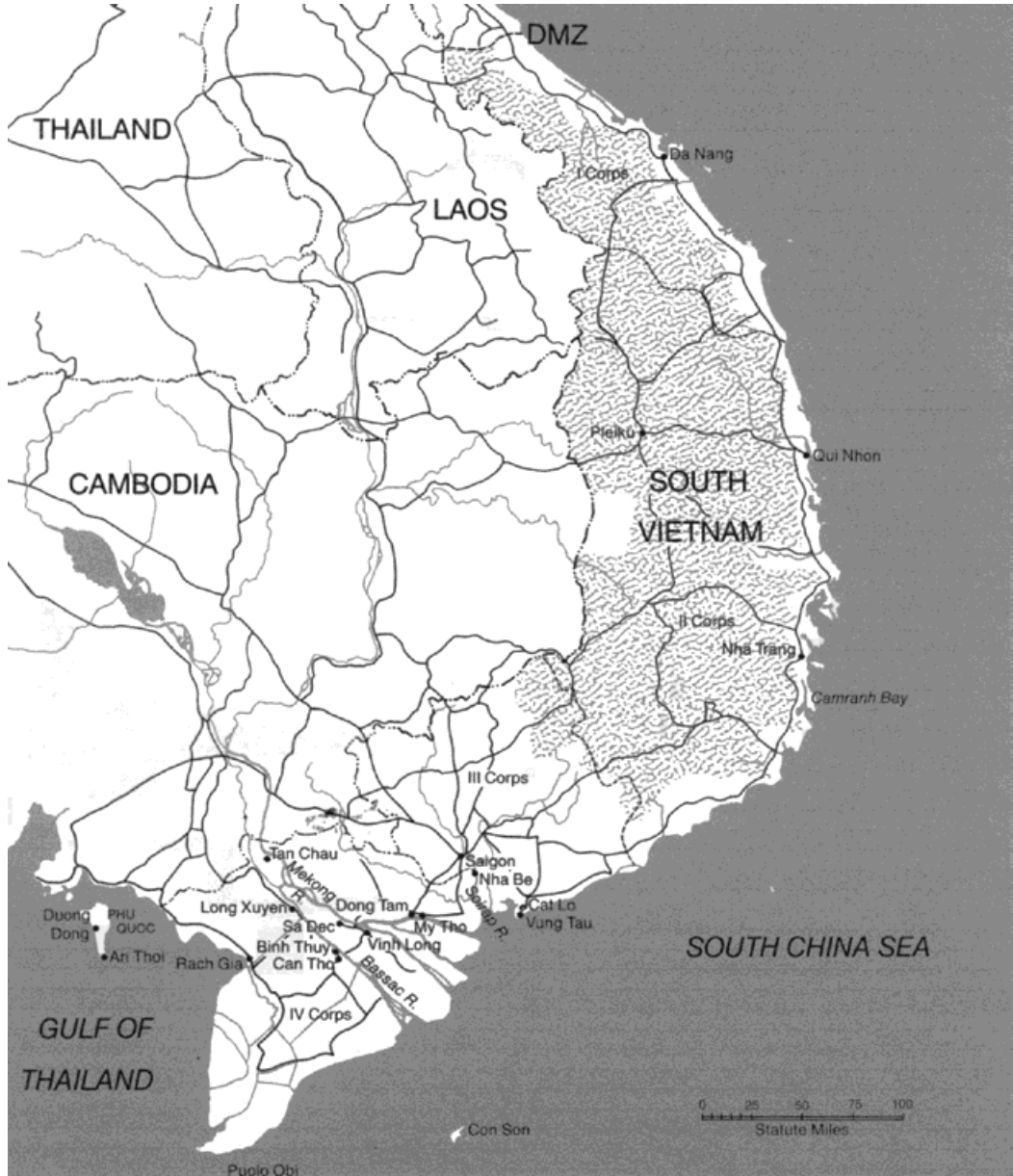


Illustration 5: The Mekong Delta, IV Corps Tactical Zone.

Courtesy of Naval Institute Press.

Cambodia. But, apparently because authorities in Washington did not think the tonnage of cargo being unloaded in Sihanoukville was significant, and, as Dr. Marolda says, because some of the weapons-bearing ships bound for that port were Chinese, rather than North Vietnamese, the Market Time commanders were not permitted to extend their patrols the few miles necessary to close that port to the enemy.¹⁴ Yet, those engaged in guerrilla warfare, as the Viet Cong were, have no use for heavy items or large tonnages of anything. Small tonnages of infantry weapons and ammunition were ample for their purposes.

In the approaches to Saigon, twenty miles downstream and twenty miles up, twice a day, at eight knots and never more than a few hundred feet from the hostile bank, Game Warden's small detachment of 57-foot wooden minesweeping boats dragged along the river bottom a grapnel, the purpose of which was to cut the cables connecting the enemy controllers on the river bank to their mines at the bottom of the channel. In this fashion, the minesweeping boats kept the Long Tao channel safe most of the time, though sometimes at the cost of their own survival. To offer some protection to those minesweepers, the Air Force sprayed Agent Orange along the banks of the Long Tao, killing the jungle foliage in which the enemy mine controllers and rocket-firers hid. But the enemy managed to hide anyway, so armed helicopters and river gunboats covered the minesweeping craft from both the surface and just above it.

At first, in the lower reaches of the Mekong and Bassac rivers, Game Warden's new 31-foot fiberglass river patrol boats, or PBRs, and cast-off Army helicopters made it more difficult than before for the Viet Cong to move troops, arms, ammunition, and supplies along (or much more often, across) the rivers and other waterways, but not so difficult as to immobilize them. A year or so after Game Warden began, the joint riverine force, an independent two-headed command, a navy commander and an army commander, neither senior to the other, appeared in the Mekong Delta. By means of the mobility provided by its heavily armed and armored landing craft, this force was supposed to surprise the Viet Cong in their strongholds. But the boats were slow and, like most American craft, noisy; they were, of course, confined to the water; and the two-headed command setup did not always work as well as had been hoped. After a time, the Army lost interest and the force faded away.

Later, under Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Game Warden's boats and helicopters moved upstream into the tidal creeks and canals along the Cambodian border in order to halt the flow of traffic coming down from Sihanoukville. They were joined in those narrow streams by the larger, less-agile Swift boats which, until the enemy changed the destination of his supply craft from secret spots on the South Vietnamese coast to open entry into Sihanoukville, had been used by Market Time with some success. Whichever kind they were, the boats and helicopters suffered very heavy casualties, and the enemy's supplies still got through to their intended recipients. A naval helicopter detachment began to operate in that area early in 1969 with eight pilots and eight

¹⁴ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 181-182, 389; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U. S. Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, Ca.: Presidio Press, 1978), 49, 85, 230; and Prados, *Hidden History*, 235-236.

gunners. Within five weeks four pilots and three gunners were killed in action, and two more were seriously wounded; one petty officer was awarded the Navy Cross.¹⁵ Altogether, during “Giant Slingshot,” one of Game Warden’s operations upstream near the Cambodian border, December 1968 to May 1970, more Purple Hearts were awarded than there were officers and men in the command. Had South Vietnamese ground forces been more active in these efforts, we might have been more successful for, as Commander R. L. Schreadley writes, “in Brown Water Navy operations in Vietnam, participation by trained and aggressive ground forces was the real key to success in any campaign.” Unfortunately, the South Vietnamese were not much interested, and did not much participate.¹⁶

In 1969, the Air Force began secret bombing raids on the North’s supply bases in Cambodia; secret, that is, from us back here. The enemy knew all about them. In the next year, 1970, a palace revolution in Cambodia put an end to the arms traffic through Sihanoukville. Shortly after that U. S. Army and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia. The invaders destroyed the enemy’s bases and his stockpiled arms and ammunition, but the reaction both in the United States and abroad was so violent that the bombing, which had become public knowledge, was halted, and the invaders withdrawn.¹⁷

As long as the Marines were in I Corps, NSA Da Nang, with its great new port and its seaborne supply routes, was also present. So were the protecting river combatants. By 1970, however, the only U. S. Marines and naval personnel still in Vietnam were a few advisors, and they were in just about the same places as their predecessors had been seven years beforehand.¹⁸ Between the beginning and end of the war, probably the most important event was the Tet Offensive. It erupted violently at the end of January 1968, in nearly every city in South Vietnam, including, spectacularly, Saigon. Despite the large number of people involved, we Americans were taken by surprise. Not only did we not know as much about our enemy as we should have, but too often we had cast a blind eye upon the serious shortcomings of South Vietnam’s civil government and armed forces.

With the fighting still going fiercely in March 1968, President Johnson, who knew by then that he had lost the never very great confidence of the American people in his handling of the war, announced that he had abandoned his greatest desire, to run for, and win, re-election in November. It was Richard Nixon whom the American people elected President of the United States and on 20 January 1969 he assumed office. One of

¹⁵ Conversations with Professor William M. Calhoun of the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. A former naval aviator, Professor Calhoun was assigned to Helicopter Attack Light Squadron Three (HAL-3) in the Mekong Delta in 1969 and 1970.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), pp.305-306; and R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea: The United States Navy in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 154-156, 287.

¹⁷ The military aspects of the invasion of Cambodia are well covered in Prados, *Hidden History*, 235-247.

¹⁸ Collins, Vietnam, 211-217, 223-225. See also S. A. Swarztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” *Naval Review 1970* and *Vietnam, the Naval Story*, 374-378.

the important actions he took was to begin reducing the size of the U. S. forces in Vietnam. In general, by 1971 combat had fallen to a low order, and the American government chose officially to believe that the South Vietnamese could defend themselves. Though peace talks between this country and North Vietnam went on, as they had for years, they led nowhere. The South Vietnamese were largely shut out of these talks.

But while little was going on in South Vietnam much was taking place in the North. "Nearly 350 Soviet ships," Brigadier General Dave Richard Palmer writes, "brought a million tons of cargo to North Vietnamese ports in 1971. Foremost among the equipment delivered were scores of heavy artillery pieces and hundreds of main battle tanks. The artillery, 130-mm long-range cannon, provided Northern units a stand-off capability quite surpassing the South's, while Russian medium armor was a match for the U. S. M-48 tanks used by the South Vietnamese. In the overall amount of heavy equipment at hand, Northern troops would have a frightening superiority."¹⁹

By 1972 both Premier Khrushchev and President Johnson had long been out of office. Khrushchev's successor, the stolid, seemingly sleepy Leonid Brezhnev, was happy for the Americans to engage themselves so desperately in a minor theater far from the main area of contention, Europe. President Nixon was focused on getting the remaining American forces out of Vietnam "with honor," before any new disagreeable facts revealed themselves. He was content to leave Haiphong open, as it long had been. Early that year his thoughts turned to his forthcoming reelection campaign. Among other things, he wanted to run on having achieved peace in South Vietnam, a country from which the successful American fighting forces had properly departed; or at least, the appearance of such a country.

At the end of March North Vietnam attacked again, across the border into South Vietnam, with their armored forces and supported by long-range artillery. The South Vietnamese forces fought back better than ever before, but still not well enough. If Nixon's hope to be re-elected by the American people were to come true, he would first have to respond to those disagreeable facts. So, U. S. air force and naval aircraft joined the fight powerfully, swiftly, and effectively, especially against the North's new and secretly-deployed armored forces. The enemy was driven to give up some of his territorial gains. The Air Force and Navy also resumed their bombing of the North, this time with better rules and better weapons than before.

In May 1972 Nixon added something new.: After having ascertained from both Moscow and Beijing that neither the Soviet Union nor China would react belligerently, he directed the U. S. Navy, by means of a mine field, to close Haiphong and the lesser ports to all seagoing traffic.²⁰ On 8 May nine mine-bearing A-6 and A-7 attack planes took off from three carriers in the Tonkin Gulf. According to the co-authors John B. Nichols and Barrett Tillman, the mines "were delivered at no loss to American lives. Communist defenses were poorly positioned to engage mining aircraft. Yet the nine aircraft involved produced more far-reaching results than had eighty-five hundred aircraft and the seven

¹⁹ Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 248.

²⁰ Prados, *The Hidden History*, 267-268.

million tons of ordnance expended throughout Indochina since 1961.”²¹ Many more mines followed those dropped by the first nine aircraft, and as they grew old and inert, new ones took their place. Thereafter, with a single exception in October, no ship moved out of Haiphong. More importantly, no ship moved in. At some of the minor ports, such as Hon Gai, just north of Haiphong, a few ships anchored just outside the minefield, and small craft came out to lighter the cargo into port. But in each case either Seventh Fleet destroyers or carrier-based aircraft arrived in time to sink the lighters and that effort soon ceased. Perhaps to underscore the message, in August A-6 bombers destroyed a boatyard near Haiphong which had been building craft suitable for lightering.²² Since about 85 percent of the military goods and almost 100 percent of the fuel the Soviets sent to North Vietnam went in ships, these naval actions meant that for the first time nearly every shot fired by the North Vietnamese, nearly every gallon of fuel burned, nearly every weapon lost to enemy fire, was a shot, a gallon, a weapon that could not be replaced.

In Hanoi peace talks took on a new urgency. But late in the year they failed again. After a pause, on 18 December the U. S. began bombing Hanoi and Haiphong more vigorously than ever before. For eleven days the air force sent heavy B-52 bombers — in very large numbers — to attack military and transportation centers near Hanoi and Haiphong. In turn, in the first nine days, the North Vietnamese shot down fifteen of those big bombers, and added 31 to the number of American aviators and air crewmen they held in their torture chambers. On the 10th and 11th days the North Vietnamese fired no SAMs at the big bombers. The blockade had bitten deeply, and it appears that they had no more left to fire. By this time not only had Richard Nixon won his campaign for re-election, but also the rulers in Hanoi had come to realize that peace, even for a short while, is the best of all possible mine counter-measures systems, and the best of all air-defense systems, too. Talks between the Americans and North Vietnamese resumed, and the latter gave the Americans the little we wanted. That little was the return to the United States of all the POWs, including the 31 most recent arrivals, and, for a “decent interval,” a halt to North Vietnam’s invasions of the South. As required, the Americans swept the already inert minefield, and then Soviet ships, filled with the goods of war and peace, flowed once again into Haiphong.

Two years later, in 1975, with the North’s forces rejuvenated and rearmed, and Nixon having been driven from office chiefly as a result of his own shortcomings, the “decent interval” ended, more swiftly than the Americans had expected. The invasion of the South resumed. The South Vietnamese forces, in the absence of any help from their

²¹ John B. Nichols and Barrett Tillman, *On Yankee Station: The Naval Air War over Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 133.

²² Discussions with Thomas C. Vance of Annapolis who in 1972 was a bombardier-navigator in VA-75, an A-6 squadron flying attack missions in the Haiphong area from the carrier *Saratoga* (CVA 60). See J. B. Finkelstein, “Naval and Maritime Events July 1972-December 1972” in *Naval Review 1973* (this was also the May 1973 issue of the *Naval Institute Proceedings*), 347-360, entries for 2 July, 1 August, and 4 October. For a recent account of this war’s final months, see Carol Reardon, *Launch the Intruders: A Naval Attack Squadron in the Vietnam War, 1972* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

former American sponsors, collapsed quickly, and before long the men in Hanoi ruled Vietnam from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Thailand, just as had always thought they should. One of the interesting things is that, while the North's soldiers danced their victory jigs in Saigon's streets, the rulers in Moscow and Beijing hardly cared. Not many Americans cared either. So ended the war.

I believe that I have supported my proposition that almost the entire naval share of the war had to do with one side's logistics, or the other, if not both. Moreover, though not all may like to believe it, I hope it is clear that the Navy is not an independent actor responsible only to itself. Rather, it is one of many parts of the government, distinctive for its knowledge, skills, and powers, and as obedient as all other parts to the President and his senior appointees, civil and military alike.

