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Achieving Success in a Difficult War

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MOST MILITARY ACCOUNTS OF THE VIETNAM WAR emphasize the role of the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force. During the war, little attention was paid to operations to prevent coastal and riverine infiltration by communist forces. This story—particularly the Coast Guard's part in it—warrants closer examination, particularly given the resurgence of interest in near-shore operations now termed "littoral warfare."

The U.S. Navy of the mid-1960s focused on strategic nuclear warfare (Polaris submarines and attack aircraft carriers playing principal roles), antisubmarine warfare (against the growing Soviet underwater threat), and high-seas operations (with supersonic aircraft and guided missiles entering the fleet). The Navy had not anticipated the need for vessels that could patrol along the coastline of Vietnam, and it soon recognized that the Coast Guard was the only service with the capabilities for this type of operation. The Coast Guard, drawing upon its historical experience of patrolling the waterways within and around the United States, applied its knowledge of coastal defense to this new challenge. Coast Guard forces worked together with the Navy to create a "brown-water" navy to prevent communist movement of men and supplies into South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Navy planners understandably focused on designing large, blue-water ships for a major naval battle with the Soviet Union. In any future war in central Europe, the Navy's primary responsibility would be to maintain control of the Atlantic; thus it needed large and powerful ships. A "brown-water" force, that operates close to the shore and along rivers and canals, must work closely with ground troops, forming a combined force. The tactics of brown-water naval units often resemble those of the ground forces,

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featuring patrols, ambushes, and overwhelming firepower. Such operations require innovative tactical approaches and special equipment to achieve success, particularly because environmental problems can hamper the performance of such a naval force. Natural hindrances, such as changing currents and varying depths of water, as well as such physical barriers as river banks, islands, and inlets, all require a vessel's crew to be constantly alert. The dense vegetation, heavy fog, and rain of Vietnam provided the enemy excellent opportunities to ambush U.S. naval vessels. In addition, near-shore operations place naval units among hundreds of vessels engaged in fishing and other routine coastal commerce, with the occasional enemy vessel disguised and indistinguishable until it is approached for inspection. The traffic of the South China Sea provided months of tedium and unpleasantness, and moments of vicious close combat.[1]

This article examines why the Navy sought Coast Guard assistance in Vietnam and what the Coast Guard experience in that war was like. It addresses the relationship between the Coast Guard and the Navy in Vietnam, and comments on why the Coast Guard's role in the Vietnam War was an important one. Finally, a brief observation is offered about why a war in which few of today's sailors participated may have much to teach about tomorrow's combat operations.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Viet Cong forces and sympathizers used the coastal waters and rivers of Vietnam for shipping men, supplies, and matériel from the North, items the Viet Cong needed in order to fight the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). Typically, the communists hid weapons in everything from farmers' packs to the holds of small fishing boats that traveled along the waterways around and within Vietnam. A Navy Section of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group had been in Vietnam since August 1950, and although U.S. advisors suspected such infiltration, they had difficulty detecting, much less eradicating, it. Nevertheless, as early as 1961 U.S. naval forces began training crews of the South Vietnamese Navy (VNN) in coastal patrol. Although this training helped, the VNN simply did not have enough trained personnel or equipment to patrol adequately the 1,200-mile coast from Cua Viet near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to Ha Tien on the Gulf of Siam, and also the border of Cambodia. The inadequacies of the VNN, along with the overwhelming number of potential enemy vessels, made concrete evidence of infiltration difficult to find.[2]

By 1964, Navy advisors believed that North Vietnam was supplying communist forces in the South on a large scale. U.S. military advisors speculated that following the violent overthrow and murder in November 1963 of President Ngo Dinh Diem, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces were infiltrating the South in preparation for large, conventional battles as part of

what theorists of revolutionary war call the "third stage" of insurgency. The most economical and direct route for infiltrating men and supplies was by sea. Although the VNN had additional ships by 1964, it was still undermanned and weak. Even if these sea routes could be blocked by the VNN, the inland river systems from Cambodia offered an alternative means of water-borne infiltration. In addition, the Mekong River remained open to traffic to and from Cambodia until the late 1960s.[3]

In 1964, to understand better the dimensions of the infiltration problem, the Navy sent Captain Philip H. Bucklew and a team of investigators to Vietnam. The Bucklew report of 15 February 1964 contended that men and supplies were getting into South Vietnam through the Bassac and Mekong River routes aboard fishing boats and junks. Bucklew found that "Viet Cong operations, supported by minimum effort in diversion, deception, or harassment cover, can feasibly infiltrate personnel and equipment by land, sea, and air at times and areas of their choice."[4] The report made several recommendations to solve the infiltration problem. First, it called for strengthening coastal patrols and establishing a tighter naval blockade around South Vietnam. Second, it suggested that the Seventh Fleet assist the South Vietnamese Navy by providing air reconnaissance of the coastal waters. Third, it urged providing the VNN with more U.S. Navy advisors. Finally, the report envisioned curfews and a system of checkpoints and patrols along all major rivers to cut enemy supply lines. Captain Bucklew did not, however, recommend the deployment of any additional Navy equipment to Vietnam; his investigators believed that the VNN could defend South Vietnam's coastline, given a minor addition of Navy advisors and the assistance of the Seventh Fleet.[5] Subsequent experience made plain that Bucklew's investigation had not fully appreciated the problem of coastal infiltration and that the VNN could not succeed without U.S. military assistance.

By 1965, Navy advisors had discovered the enemy's tactics. Primarily, the Viet Cong used the indigenous vessels of Vietnam, junks, to carry the contraband material. These junks sailed close to the shore, among the normal, busy traffic along Vietnam's coast, and so were unnoticed by South Vietnam's patrol forces. In addition, the North Vietnamese used larger craft, such as trawlers, which sailed in international waters free from inspection or attack and waited for the right moment—usually at night—to make high-speed breaks for the coast, where they would offload their supplies. Navy advisors believed that South Vietnam faced "impending defeat" if this form of infiltration from the sea was not halted. Although "impending defeat" may have been in retrospect an exaggeration, the use of rivers and the sea for enemy resupply did pose a serious threat to the South's ability to defeat the VC.[6] The coastal threat, combined with Diem's death, instability in South Vietnam's government, the small

number of U.S. personnel in the theater, and the weaknesses of the ARVN all seemed to point toward a Communist victory in the near future.

New evidence of water-borne resupply came early in 1965. On 16 February a U.S. UH-1 helicopter on a medical rescue mission sighted a ship in Vung Ro Bay, on South Vietnam's central coast, and notified the Coastal Patrol Force of the VNN. Moments later, South Vietnamese aircraft arrived on the scene and began to observe the ship. Pilots reported a large trawler carrying mortar launchers on its deck steaming at high speed for the coast. At that point, a South Vietnam Air Force AD Skyraider attacked the ship, driving the vessel aground. For three days heavy resistance from the trawler's crew thwarted several efforts to board or destroy the ship; finally South Vietnamese and U.S. Navy forces seized the vessel. They discovered a million rounds of small arms ammunition, three thousand rifles, a thousand stick grenades, a quarter of a ton of TNT, five hundred antitank grenades, two thousand 82-millimeter mortar rounds, and medical supplies. In addition, they found papers aboard the ship showing that the vessel had succeeded in supplying communist forces in South Vietnam on twenty-two previous occasions.[7] This one incident illustrated the magnitude of enemy infiltration of weapons and supplies from North Vietnam. A year after Bucklew's recommendations went into effect, the U.S. Navy realized it needed to play a greater role in stopping Communist infiltration and could not rely on the largely inefficient and ineffective South Vietnamese Navy.[8]

The year 1965 was a turning point for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The Navy, and later the Coast Guard, now joined the war on a large scale with coastal and riverine forces to stop the flow of weapons and supplies into South Vietnam. On 16 March 1965 General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, approved a recommendation that U.S. and South Vietnamese naval forces operate together against coastal infiltration, in Operation MARKET TIME. MARKET TIME's mission was to conduct surveillance and interdiction along the coast of South Vietnam, watching in particular for junks carrying weapons or supplies to the enemy.[9]

Only a month later, the realities and difficulties of this operation began to be apparent. Although the destroyers, destroyer escorts, and minesweepers used at the outset of Operation MARKET TIME represented an impressive "show of force," their draft limited their usefulness close to shore. Enemy infiltrators could quickly cut to the shoreline and off-load their supplies. This forced the Navy to rely on the VNN to patrol close to the shore. The VNN's "Junk Force," however, did not possess enough trained men or properly maintained ships to sustain a steady patrol along the coastline. Facing a daily average of sixty thousand junks and sampans along the 1,200-mile coast, the VNN's likelihood of intercepting North Vietnamese craft smuggling weapons and supplies to the

South was slim at best. So many possible enemy vessels over such a large area overwhelmed the U.S. Navy and VNN forces then in place.[10] Moreover, it was inefficient and extremely cumbersome for large ships to investigate dozens of small craft each day.

Thus the U.S. military command needed a small offshore combatant craft with a shallow draft, great maneuverability, a low freeboard, and the ability to mount numerous small arms. Such a vessel did not exist in the Navy's inventory. The Navy, having underestimated the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, now faced a major dilemma. Its options were to develop and deploy a new craft for shallow water, which could take months if not years, or to see if the Coast Guard could assist. The Coast Guard already had trained men and ships capable of operating in this environment, offering a rapid solution to the problem in Vietnam.[11]

To request Coast Guard cooperation was not a simple process. On 16 April 1965, Secretary of the Navy Paul Nitze sent a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Fowler, describing the Navy's difficulties in Vietnam and requesting Coast Guard assistance. Nitze observed that the Seventh Fleet's vessels currently employed in coastal patrol were at a disadvantage against the small, fast junks used for infiltration by communist forces. Navy ships, due to their size and draft, could not pursue the enemy among the thousands of small vessels clogging the coastline or engage the enemy close to shore. The Navy needed a craft suitable for this type of operation, one with high speed, a shallow draft, radar, and communications capabilities. Nitze concluded with a formal inquiry as to whether such a vessel existed in the Coast Guard's inventory.[12]

On 22 April 1965, at a conference in Honolulu, representatives of the Coast Guard and Navy discussed this issue, developing a preliminary agreement that would lend the Navy seventeen of the total of forty-four Coast Guard eighty-two-foot patrol boats (WPBs). (In September 1965 another nine boats were added to this agreement.) Coast Guard crews and maintenance personnel would accompany their craft to Vietnam. Since the transfer of these vessels might weaken the Coast Guard's primary mission, the protection of waterways around and within the United States, the Coast Guard planned to lengthen the patrols of the remaining craft. In addition, the Coast Guard anticipated calling up its reserve and auxiliary.[13]

A joint Defense and Treasury memorandum sent to President Lyndon Johnson on 29 April 1965 formally proposed Coast Guard involvement in Vietnam. The secretaries outlined the two options and argued that the Coast Guard's surveillance and defense of the coasts of the United States mirrored its proposed role in Vietnam. In addition, the memorandum noted, the Coast Guard historically had provided men and ships for military purposes. Coast Guard craft in Vietnam would fall under Navy operational authority, and the

Navy would pay for their deployment, maintenance, and any damage incurred in combat. The two secretaries asserted that the Coast Guard was well suited for this mission, and President Johnson agreed. The Defense Department issued a press release explaining why the Coast Guard was to join in the war effort and how its involvement would enhance the effectiveness of U.S. naval forces in Vietnam.[14]

The Coast Guard cutter first deployed to Vietnam, the WPB, had a top speed of twenty knots and a crew of eleven men. Originally only lightly armed with a 20-millimeter cannon, the craft sent to Vietnam replaced that weapon with a .50 caliber machine gun fitted onto an 81-millimeter mortar launcher, and added four more .50 caliber machine guns aft of the bridge. The machine guns provided a high rate of fire in case of attack at close range, while the mortar was useful for destroying trawlers, firing illuminating "starshells," and providing some shore bombardment.[15] Although slower than the Navy's "Swift boats" (PCFs), which began arriving in South Vietnam in October 1965, the Coast Guard WPB could handle much rougher water, had a larger crew, and offered slightly superior firepower and armor protection. The WPB would operate close to the shore, serving as the main interception ship, and it would also provide occasional fire support for ground forces.[16]

The WPBs proved ideal. Once in the theater of operations, they required only a small amount of logistical and mechanical support. Responsive maintenance, rotation of fresh crews, and replenishment at sea allowed these vessels to maintain a 70 percent operational rate. No other ship in Vietnam matched the operational readiness of the WPB.[17]

Ships of the Military Sea Transportation Service (as the Military Sealift Command was known until 1970) ferried the WPBs from both the East and West coasts to Subic Bay in the Philippines. En route, the 81 mm mortar and the .50 caliber machine guns were mounted. The Navy also installed deck lights and single-sideband radio transceivers. These additions made the WPB capable of attacking either the smallest junk or a large trawler.[18]

Coast Guard personnel traveled to Coronado, California, for special training like that which their Navy counterparts received. The first week focused on counterinsurgency, the background of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the nature of the conflict to that point. Then there was a week on survival, evasion, resistance, and escape techniques. The Coast Guardsmen spent another week of training to operate and maintain the 81 mm mortar and the .50 caliber guns, and a final week reviewing such operational readiness techniques as damage control, boarding and communication procedures, and navigation. Upon completion of this training program the crews flew to the Philippines, where they were assigned to the same craft they had operated in the United States; however,

whereas in the United States chief petty officers commanded WPBs, now a USCG lieutenant (junior grade), assisted by a more junior officer, commanded each craft. At the end of June 1965 the first Coast Guard crews and ships arrived at Subic Bay, ready to cross the South China Sea to Vietnam. The rough South China Sea gave the Coast Guard crews a glimpse of what the waters off Vietnam offered and also an opportunity to complete several underway replenishments with Navy ships, a skill they needed for extended operations at sea.[19]

As part of Operation MARKET TIME, Coast Guard craft formed an important part of the naval presence along the coast of Vietnam. Their main goals were to conduct surveillance and aid in preventing the infiltration of men and matériel into South Vietnam. As a secondary mission, Coast Guard ships occasionally provided transport or naval gunfire support for U.S. forces. Coast Guardsmen served ten-month tours in Vietnam. The Navy expected Coast Guard vessels to be on patrol two-thirds of the time, a higher demand on both the men and equipment than was required during peacetime in the United States. To meet this demand, the Coast Guard assigned three different crews to each craft, producing a constant rotation of sailors. With a limited number of Coast Guard ships available for Vietnam, the Coast Guard implemented these measures as the most efficient way to keep men and ships constantly on patrol.[20]

Together with Navy vessels, Coast Guard ships created a surveillance network composed of three layers of defense against infiltration. One hundred miles from the coast of Vietnam, Navy P-2V Neptune and P-3 Orion aircraft monitored shipping and recorded anything that seemed suspicious, such as weapons on trawler decks or junks in areas away from normal traffic. At forty miles from the coast was a second barrier, made up of Navy minesweepers, radar picket destroyer escorts, patrol gunboats, and (after 1967) Coast Guard high endurance cutters. Finally, right along the coast, Navy PCFs, Coast Guard WPBs, and Vietnamese Navy junks patrolled. The vessels in the last barrier worked very close to the shore and faced constant danger of grounding and enemy attack.[21]

For the men of the Coast Guard, each boarding involved tension. To avoid booby traps and surprise attacks, crew members of craft under inspection were required to open everything. Forced to remain on constant alert for anything suspicious, Coast Guard personnel needed nonetheless to avoid being "trigger-happy." Often they had to make split-second decisions, and they showed a great deal of restraint. In a complete search of a boat, Coast Guard personnel used a probe, a metal detector, and an angled mirror to help find enemy contraband, but the manual method was the most effective. This, however, meant moving large amounts of cargo or sifting by hand through holds full of fish, a physically exhausting and in no way glamorous job. To add to the stress of boarding, the crews of vessels that did not have enemy contraband were often openly hostile

at having their boats ransacked. Coast Guard crews gave candy, fresh fruit, or C-rations to compensate for this inconvenience.[22]

The Coast Guard had other problems in boarding and inspecting junks. Often it was difficult to define what was "enemy supply." Of course, guns or ammunition were an easy giveaway, but what about rice, salt, or other non-military goods? Even a large amount of rice could be carried for legitimate commerce—but it could also be used to feed the enemy. Cargo manifests sometimes provided the answers, but they could be forged. With a VNN liaison aboard, inspecting papers was easy, but not every Coast Guard cutter had a liaison officer. A fine line existed between what could be considered personal belongings and materials to supply the enemy. The decision rested with the Coast Guardsmen on the scene; they did not have time to get a second opinion from someone higher up the chain of command. The officer or crew member in charge of the inspection relied heavily on instinct and lessons from previous inspections, and individual cutter officers were encouraged to use their own initiative for creating systems for capturing enemy infiltrators. All this increased the possibility of serious mistakes. On the other hand, however, information on trade routes, locations of fishing areas, enemy strongholds, tactics used by enemy forces, and types of fishing boats used was collected by and shared among U.S. naval, Coast Guard, and VNN commands and analyzed to aid in future patrols.[23]

For the men of the Coast Guard, MARKET TIME proved to be a difficult mission with little glamor. In a single mile of water the judgment of a commanding officer might become swamped by hundreds of junks that warranted boarding or at least a quick visual search. Great pressure fell on the individual officer on the scene who had to make these decisions. Coast Guard crews came to believe in boarding aggressively, thoroughly searching as many vessels as possible, especially at night, when most infiltration occurred. In the darkness and far from the coast the enemy had a greater chance of avoiding interception by Navy planes or ships, making near-shore Coast Guard and Swift boat patrols even more important. Cutter crews tried to avoid patterns in their operations, while remaining alert to anything that seemed out of the ordinary, such as junks running without lights at night, or in areas off limits to commercial activity, or attempting to avoid inspection by evasive maneuvering or refusing hails. The Coast Guard mission in Vietnam to thwart communist resupply certainly required flexibility.

An average patrol lasted four to six days, and individual crews normally participated in about five or six patrols per month. Crews received five days of rest after six patrols. This schedule aimed at maintaining morale and effectiveness. Although life at sea was anything but pleasant, Coast Guardsmen did not face the grueling conditions or daily encounters with combat that fell to the ground forces in Vietnam.[24]

In 1967 the Navy requested more Coast Guard assistance, this time to augment the radar picket destroyer escorts. The 311-foot *Casco*-class or the 255-foot *Owasco*-class Coast Guard high endurance cutter (WHEC) was much bigger than the WPB, had a five-inch gun forward, two 40 millimeter guns, a top speed of eighteen knots, and a crew of 215 men. Unlike a destroyer escort, the WHEC also had a pad to receive helicopters, for parts, supplies, and rapid evacuation of the wounded. The missions of the WHEC in MARKET TIME were to provide gunfire support, trawler surveillance and inspection, medical assistance, and underway replenishment of WPBs and Navy Swift boats, especially far from bases in the southernmost waters of Vietnam. Rotating deployments among thirty of these World War II–era cutters, and later including units of the *Bibb* and the new *Hamilton* class, five WHECs were deployed to Vietnam in Coast Guard Squadron 3, based in Subic Bay, the Philippines, until the end of 1971.[25]

Throughout the war, the Coast Guard worked closely with the Navy in all major operations in which it was involved. On 29 February 1968, for example, the Coast Guard played a large part in the most significant naval engagement of the war. Four enemy trawlers attempted to infiltrate different points of the South Vietnamese coast simultaneously as part of the Tet Offensive, which had begun a month earlier. The WHEC *Androscoggin*, the WPBs *Point Welcome* and *Point Grey*, and two Navy Swift boats handled the first interception, near Cu Lao Re Island. The U.S. forces waited until the enemy was six miles from the coast, when the *Androscoggin* challenged and illuminated the contact. The large trawler laid a screen of smoke and tried to evade interception; supported by a helicopter gunship, the *Androscoggin* opened fire. When the trawler continued toward the coast, the other Coast Guard cutters and Navy Swifts joined in the attack. The trawler exploded and sank.[26]

Meanwhile, off the Ca Mau Peninsula (the southernmost tip of Vietnam), the Coast Guard high endurance cutter *Winona* and WPBs *Point Grace*, *Point Maron*, and *Point Hudson*, along with Navy Swifts, intercepted a second vessel. Closing to a distance of six hundred yards, the *Winona* attempted to capture the enemy vessel intact. The trawler opened fire; a short battle followed, as a result of which the trawler sank near the shore. At the same time, at the opposite end of South Vietnam, the WHEC *Minnetonka* challenged a third trawler, which escaped attack by retreating north of the 17th Parallel. Finally, northeast of Nha Trang, a Coast Guard WPB along with Navy units destroyed a fourth enemy trawler with several direct hits from the WPB's 81 mm mortar.[27]

In each of these four interceptions Coast Guard ships played a critical role, using their shallow drafts to keep the trawlers from reaching shore, and in three cases providing the necessary firepower to sink the enemy craft. These examples illustrated both the capacity of and the necessity for the Navy and Coast Guard to work together. Navy planes and large ships made the initial contact with the

enemy miles from shore, while smaller craft and helicopters attacked when the trawlers or small junks tried to reach the shore. The Coast Guard benefited from surface and air long-distance surveillance provided by the Navy. Both services recognized the abilities and strengths of the other and knew that neither could carry out the mission on its own.[28]

This realization minimized conflict between the two services. Interservice rivalries did not hinder the joint effectiveness of the Navy and Coast Guard in Vietnam. There were many parallels between their missions, combat duties, and operations. In addition, the Navy did not see the Coast Guard as a rival, as it might have viewed the other Defense Department services. Despite an initial wariness toward the men of the Coast Guard, Navy personnel quickly came to appreciate the strong spirit of Coast Guard personnel and their ability to overcome obstacles, such as the weather and rough waters off the coast of Vietnam. Many within the Navy complimented their fellow seamen of the Coast Guard, regularly describing them as an "outstanding group of men."[29]

Assignment to Vietnam drew mixed reactions from those who served in the Coast Guard. For many the assignment was unexpected, and some were unenthusiastic about duty so far from home. These men believed the Navy should handle the situation in Vietnam on its own while the Coast Guard continued to patrol within the United States. The Coast Guard arranged for those who did not want to go to Vietnam for family or personal reasons to be reassigned, but did not discharge them. Not being a permanent branch of the armed forces, the Coast Guard allowed those who did not want to serve in Vietnam to remain in the service without disciplinary action.[30] For those who went to Vietnam, duty aboard Coast Guard vessels proved quite strenuous and demanding. Vietnam's weather wore down the sailors' endurance. It always seemed to be hot and humid, and when it did rain, as during the monsoon season, it seemed never to stop. These natural conditions often made life miserable aboard Coast Guard ships. The rough waters off Vietnam were much worse than those around the United States and constantly seemed to hinder Coast Guard operations. Assignment to Vietnam was both challenging and difficult for Coast Guard volunteers.[31]

Though they monitored thousands of delta inlets, rivers, canals, swamps, and the open sea along twelve hundred miles of coastline, individual Coast Guard ships rarely engaged in combat in Vietnam. Since thousands of vessels traveled daily along the coast of Vietnam, the chances were slim of encountering one that would initiate an attack. Observed one Coast Guard crewman, "Life on patrol duty consists of endless days of utter boredom, interrupted by sudden moments of terror and violence."[32] For most Coast Guard personnel, days and sometimes weeks went by with only an occasional firefight.

This near-absence of combat was in one sense a negative morale factor. Though Coast Guardsmen constantly boarded and searched suspicious vessels, they typically did not appreciate how their doing so fitted into the bigger picture. It was not explained to individuals, or at least it was not easy to keep in mind day after day, that by stopping coastal resupply they were weakening the forces opposed to the Army and Marines. Such a realization would have given Coast Guardsmen in Vietnam clear purpose and would have made sense of the burdens of their daily existence—for instance, the requirement to wear bulky flak jackets and maintain a constant level of readiness. Adding to these hardships was the rarity of shore leave for the Coast Guard. Breaks in duty mostly meant transferring to another ship, usually a floating naval supply base. While men in the other services were able to visit cities in South Vietnam away from their unit or to leave the country for several days in Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand or the Philippines, the men of the Coast Guard rarely had these opportunities.[33]

On the other hand, there was an informal, casual, and frequently friendly relationship between officers and enlisted men aboard Coast Guard cutters in Vietnam, as is characteristic of small commands. There was little room for privacy or divisions between officers and enlisted men aboard a small craft like the WPB, making for a very close-knit group. Each boarding had the potential to escalate into a combat mission. The threat of death to both Coast Guard officer and enlisted man alike brought the ranks closer together in Vietnam.[34] In fact, the line between the two is much less rigid in the Coast Guard as a whole than in the other services.[35]

On a personal level, the Coast Guard played a humanitarian role in Vietnam. Historically this has been a Coast Guard function: to aid and support others in times of need. With each boarding of a suspected enemy junk, Coast Guardsmen who found everything in order tried to provide comfort to any in need, whether with medicine for the sick or wounded, candy, or food for those with not enough to eat. Beginning in 1966, each Coast Guard cutter adopted a South Vietnamese village. By doing this, the Coast Guard aimed to improve its men's morale by giving the victims of the war names and faces. The objectives of this program were fourfold: to provide educational and informational materials in order to promote understanding; to counter VC propaganda through the distribution of accurate information; to provide medical treatment; and to promote imaginative projects and services in order to improve the civilian-military relationship.[36] In an attempt to "win the hearts and minds" of the people, the Coast Guard provided villagers with CARE packages, medical attention, daily necessities, and personal gifts. The men of the Coast Guard often enjoyed visiting the villages and seeing that their assistance really made a difference. Basic interaction with the people they were protecting gave them an added incentive to help those threatened by the war.[37]

Beginning in February 1969, a Coast Guard program called Small Craft Assets, Training, and Turnover of Resources (SCATTOR) transferred control of twenty-six WPBs to the South Vietnamese Navy. For each craft the process began when a single VNN lieutenant became its executive officer, under an American commanding officer. These two men remained aboard while VNN crew gradually replaced the American complement. When the only American left aboard was the commanding officer, the cutter received a full inspection, after which, given satisfactory findings, the craft came under the control of the South Vietnamese Navy and the Vietnamese executive officer took command. In the U.S. Navy's equivalent program, called Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV), the prospective commanding officer was the last aboard, rather than the first. (At the beginning of ACTOV the VNN did not have enough officers to man these additional ships; the South Vietnamese Navy personnel were trained, one at a time, on each particular U.S. naval vessel until an entire crew was ready to take over.) Included in the two programs were Coast Guard patrol boats and high endurance cutters, and also Navy radar picket destroyer escorts, landing ships, Swift boats, and hundreds of riverine craft.[38]

No naval aircraft went to the Vietnamese, but the United States turned over a chain of sixteen coastal radars to help combat seaborne infiltration. In addition, naval training facilities, logistical and other support centers, and all naval bases were transferred to South Vietnam's possession. U.S. Coast Guard and Navy advisors remained in Vietnam until 1972 to lend assistance and advice on the use of this equipment.[39]

In conclusion, the Coast Guard's involvement in Vietnam provided valuable assistance to the U.S. Navy in stopping the infiltration of communist forces and supplies into South Vietnam. Although no more than a thousand Coast Guardsmen served at any time, without their assistance coastal patrol would have had little chance of halting the flow of enemy supplies into South Vietnam. Also, the Coast Guard played the leading role in the destruction of all major trawlers neutralized during MARKET TIME operations; the Navy spotted enemy vessels first, but the Coast Guard, with the aid of Navy PCFs, was largely responsible for stopping the infiltrators from reaching the shore. Over the course of the war, the Coast Guard boarded nearly a quarter of a million junks and sampans, and it monitored the movements of hundreds of thousands more. Thanks to their combination of shallow draft, high speed, helo pads, and firepower, the Coast Guard cutters did things Navy warships could not do.

During its involvement in the Vietnam War, the Coast Guard destroyed nearly two thousand enemy vessels and, according to Coast Guard records, killed or wounded a total of 1,800 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese (see the table). As for Coast Guard losses, seven men died and fifty-nine were wounded, out

The Coast Guard in Vietnam*

Naval Gunfire Support Missions	5,975
Junks, Trawlers, etc., Destroyed	2,642
Enemy Strong Points Damaged/Destroyed	9,687
Coast Guardsmen Killed in Action (KIA)	7
Coast Guardsmen Wounded in Action (WIA)	59

Coast Guard Squadron One (WPB)**
27 May 1965 to 15 August 1970

Miles Cruised	4,215,116
Vessels Detected	838,299
Vessels Boarded	236,296
Vessels Inspected	283,527
Personnel Detained	10,286
Enemy KIA/WIA	1,055
Structures Damaged/Destroyed	4,727

Coast Guard Squadron Three (WHEC)‡
4 April 1967 to 31 January 1972

Miles Cruised	1,292,094
Vessels Detected	69,517
Vessels Boarded	1,094
Vessels Inspected	50,000
Personnel Detained	138
Enemy KIA/WIA	772
Structures Damaged/Destroyed	5,288

Coast Guard Ships Turned Over to the Vietnamese Navy‡‡

Patrol Boats (USCG)	WPB	26
High Endurance Cutters (USCG)	WHEC	7

* H.R. Kaplan and James F. Hunt, *This Is the Coast Guard* (Cambridge: Cornell Maritime Press, 1972), p. 87.
** Tulich, p. 55.
‡ Tulich, p. 56.
‡‡ Cutler, p. 352.

of a total of eight thousand men who participated in the war (see table). Even for the small number of Coast Guard personnel in Vietnam, the potential for an accident or friendly-fire incident remained a constant threat. On 11 August 1966, in the middle of the night, the Coast Guard cutter *Point Welcome*, patrolling near the DMZ, was bombed and strafed by a U.S. Air Force B-57 bomber and four F-4s. When the attack ended, two Coast Guardsmen were dead and eleven seriously wounded, a significant portion of Coast Guard losses during the course of the war.[40]

The overall success of coastal interdiction itself is difficult to judge, however, from an independent standpoint. Were the Coast Guard's role and mission in a sense a microcosm of the entire war, that is, marked by many individual successes but overall failure? U.S. forces captured or destroyed a large number of enemy vessels, but the many that must have gone undetected or unsearched presumably contained supplies for the communist war effort. It is unknown how many of the latter there were, which allows a wide range of assessments. According to one estimate, by the commander of Task Force 115—the coastal surveillance force—in November 1968, "fewer than 200 medium-sized fishing junks could easily meet all the Viet Cong's logistics requirements for one full day of combat operations south of the DMZ."[41] This is not a high figure when one considers the thousands of vessels involved in everyday traffic, and the many that inevitably received little or no attention from either Coast Guard or Navy forces. In addition, the Coast Guard's boarding and search figures might have become exaggerated in the same ways as were body counts in the ground campaign, perhaps even inflated to increase the service's credit in the eyes of U.S. commanders and the public and justify its involvement in Vietnam.[42]

The only way to know the truth about Operation MARKET TIME's success is to ask those against whom it was directed, but there is very little information on this aspect of the war. According to a nine-volume study by the BDM Corporation, commissioned by the U.S. Army on the conduct of the war, coastal surveillance caused the enemy to change its logistical operation. At the beginning of 1966 maritime resupply formed three-quarters of the North Vietnamese efforts, whereas by the end of the year the figure was down to one-tenth.[43] In general, though many analyses of the war have been highly critical of American military operations, few have questioned MARKET TIME's success, and commanders like General William Westmoreland and Admiral Elmo Zumwalt praised it. It seems to have been one of the few operations of the war that accomplished its goal, crippling coastal infiltration by the enemy.

Much of the Navy's and Coast Guard's success came because of the particular situation that existed in Vietnam. For example, had the North Vietnamese possessed aerial surveillance capabilities or submarines, infiltration would have been much more difficult to monitor, let alone stop. The enemy would have been

aware of the number, location, and strength of U.S. naval forces and could have avoided specific areas or attacked individual U.S. vessels operating alone. In addition, MARKET TIME dealt primarily with infiltration from the sea, leaving the problem of enemy resupply by canal or river to a separate naval campaign. This operation, known variously as GAME WARDEN, CLEARWATER, and SEA LORD, involved mainly Navy personnel afloat and Army units ashore, and it had an extremely difficult mission, due to the number of canals and rivers within Vietnam.[44]

Thanks to the work of the Coast Guard and Navy in protecting South Vietnam's coastline from infiltration, the enemy had to find alternate means to supply its forces there. For the most part, communist supply shifted to the long and arduous Ho Chi Minh Trail, a less efficient route (though ultimately one that the United States could not cut). In contrast to coastal resupply, which took only a few days, supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail often took weeks if not months to reach South Vietnam. In addition, a large trawler could carry a much larger amount of weaponry and supplies than could trucks or individuals transporting goods over land. Despite these hindrances and drawbacks to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Coast Guard forces made seaborne resupply too costly for the communists. Hence, it is clear, the U.S. Coast Guard played an important role in Vietnam by providing the necessary assistance to the Navy in its time of need.

Subsequently, of course, the Navy and Coast Guard have operated together in mutual support so regularly that it has become routine. Drug interdiction operations in the Caribbean and the Pacific, port security efforts during the Gulf war, participation in refugee rescues and Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY in Haiti, and Coast Guard presence in large exercises as well as many operational commitments may lead to the expectation that the Coast Guard always will be available to support naval requirements. This would be a mistake. The Coast Guard is a small service facing heavy demands with limited assets and a shrinking budget. Ten years ago the Commandant could not send half a dozen 110-foot patrol boats to assist EARNEST WILL convoys in the Persian Gulf; while the vessels would have been ideal for many of the escort duties, they were needed to offset a shortfall in the Coast Guard's ability to meet domestic missions of law enforcement and marine safety. Consequently, the most important lesson to be drawn from the Coast Guard's success in Vietnam may be that the Navy should take great interest in the strength and readiness of the nation's smallest armed force. For if littoral warfare is indeed the most probable future challenge to the U.S. Navy, the Coast Guard will be the Navy's most sought-after augmentation.

Notes

1. Edwin B. Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance: A Story of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War, 1965–1968* (Washington, D.C.: Govt. Print. Off., 1972), p. 128. Hooper argues that it was the Coast Guard's familiarity with operations and equipment designed for protecting America's shorelines that prompted its similar involvement in Vietnam. Also see Victor Croizat, *The Brown Water Navy: The River and Coastal War in*

Indo-China and Vietnam, 1948–1972 (New York: Blandford Press, 1984), pp. 16–7. Croizat, in an informative introduction, explains what exactly a "brown water navy" is and why the U.S. Navy was ill prepared for operations in Vietnam.

2. Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), pp. 74–5.

3. R.L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea: The United States Navy in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992), pp. 56–7.

4. Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, Saigon, *The Naval War in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Operational Archives, Naval Historical Center, 1 May 1970), p. 25. This report from the theater of operations provides a detailed discussion of U.S. Navy involvement in the war and contains details of the findings and recommendations of the Bucklew report. The threat of airborne infiltration mentioned in the report seems to overstate the Viet Cong's capabilities.

5. Ibid.

6. Croizat, p. 3.

7. Ibid., pp. 76–7.

8. Ibid.

9. Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, pp. 43–5.

10. James A. Hodgman, "MARKET TIME in the Gulf of Tonkin," in Frank Uhlig, Jr., ed., *Vietnam: The Naval Story* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986), pp. 309–12. Also see Cutler, pp. 79–81.

11. Hodgman.

12. Letter from the Secretary of the Navy to the Secretary of the Treasury, 16 April 1965, "Does CG Have Suitable Craft to Assist Navy?" Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Historian's Office, box 6, U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam.

13. Non-Navy–USCG Ron 3, January–December 1971, Non-Navy Chronological, Washington, D.C.: Operational Archives, Naval Historical Center, boxes 230–2, Vietnam Command File.

14. Memo to president, 29 April 1965, "Participation of USCG Force to Aid Naval Forces in South VN," Washington D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Historian's Office, box 6, U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam.

15. See Cutler, p. 82.

16. Robert L. Scheina, *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters and Craft, 1946–1990* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1990), pp. 8-9. For a comparison of the characteristics and capabilities of the WPB and PCF, see Uhlig, ed., p. 312.

17. Scheina, pp. 65–7. Maintenance was performed by Navy assets, both repair ships and bases ashore.

18. Eugene N. Tulich, *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia during the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1986), p. 2. This essay, by a Coast Guard lieutenant who served two tours in Vietnam, was one of the main products of the service's Historical Monograph program.

19. Hodgman, pp. 313–5.

20. Ibid., pp. 315–21.

21. Headquarters, U.S. Coast Guard Squadron Three, *U.S. Coast Guard Squadron Three* (Subic Bay, Philippines: 1972), pp. 2-4.

22. Neil Sheehan, "Sea Watch for Foe off Vietnam Long and Tedious," *New York Times*, 12 July 1966, p. A12. Also see the unit newsletters and press releases contained in Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Historian's Office, box 14, U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam.

23. Cutler, pp. 102–6. Also see Uhlig, ed., p. 324.

24. Jack Anderson, "The Strange War at Sea," *Parade*, 10 April 1966, p. 6.

25. Robert Erwin Johnson, *Guardians of the Sea: History of the United States Coast Guard, 1915 to the Present* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 334–5; and Cutler, p. 90.

26. Headquarters, U.S. Coast Guard Squadron Three, pp. 7-9.

27. Ibid.

28. A. Lainge Bailey, *Silent Partners in Vietnam: The United States Coast Guard* (Washington, D.C.: Govt. Print. Off.). Also see Tulich, pp. 32–3.

29. *The Reminiscences of Vice Adm. Edwin B. Hooper, U.S. Navy (Ret.), Oral History* (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1978), pp. 419–20; and *CGACTV OPS Diaries* (declassified files), Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Historian's Office, box 35, U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam. Although few Coast Guard personnel who served in Vietnam have published their memoirs, those from the Navy who have, and the diaries cited here, indicate no major problems or disagreements between the two services in Market Time.

30. Johnson, pp. 332–3.

31. H.R. Kaplan, "Coast Guard Played Vital Role in Vietnam War," *Navy: The Magazine of Sea Power* (November 1970), pp. 31–4. Also see Anderson, p. 6.

32. Sheehan, p. A12.

33. Cutler, pp. 99–109. Also see Arturo F. Gonzales, Jr., "Battling Bloodhounds of the South China Sea," *Saga: The Magazine for Men*, February 1968, pp. 8–11. Both provide insight into the experiences of Coast Guardsmen in Vietnam, in particular the boredom, bad weather, lack of recreation, and reasons they found it difficult to understand the point of their operation.

34. *Naval and Coast Guard Operations in Vietnam* (Nashville, Tenn.: CMI Historical Video Cassettes, 1970). This video is a thirty-minute overview of Navy operations in Vietnam plus a thirty-minute segment providing a close look at Coast Guard units in MARKET TIME: training prior to going to war, travel to Vietnam, the craft used, and thoughts of Coast Guardsmen about their combat mission.

35. Johnson, pp. 332–3.

36. Tulich, p. 28.

37. *U.S. Coast Guard Activities—Southeast Asia: Report on a Congressional Investigation of Coast Guard Operations and Installations in Thailand and South Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1968), p. 6. Also see Tulich, pp. 29–32. Tulich gives a detailed, but not complete, list of instances wherein Coast Guard cutters provided aid to specific villages, demonstrating that this program was not a publicity gimmick but a reflection of the Coast Guard's traditional role of helping the less fortunate.

38. R.L. Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950–1970," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1971, pp. 180–209. Also see Cutler, pp. 355–6.

39. Schreadley.

40. See Cutler, pp. 112–4.

41. Cutler, p. 133.

42. Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950–1970." For the "body count" problem, see Neil Sheehan, "The Role of the Press," *Naval War College Review*, February 1971, esp. p. 6, and Bernard B. Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Naval War College Review*, April 1965, esp. pp. 34–6 (both reprinted in *Naval War College Review*, Winter 1998).

43. Cutler, pp. 133–5.

44. Hodgman, p. 65.

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