

## The HISTORY of the BROWN WATER NAVY

Where do you start when you talk about the history of riverine warfare? I guess you could go all the way back to the first time some Neanderthal, armed with a club, crawled on a floating log and tried to keep his neighbor from using the river for transportation or from crossing it. For the United States Navy, riverine warfare was an early mission. American sailors disputed British the use of the rivers during the Revolutionary war. During the War of 1812 naval battles were fought on the Great Lakes. Commodore Perry, during the war with Mexico in 1846, commanded 7 vessels and a 253 man landing force that sailed seventy-two miles up the Tabasco River in Mexico and captured the town by the same name.

All these were beginnings for the U.S. Navy's Brown-water mission, but ask any River Rat and he'll tell you our roots start with the Civil War in America, when the Union was suddenly faced with the need to invade and control vast areas cut by large, navigable rivers. The boats to accomplish this mission were conceived by James B. Eads, an engineer and salvage operator. His plan was to create iron-plated gunboats to control the western rivers. A contract was given Eads to build seven gunboats of his basic design. After being modified considerably by Pook, a naval constructor, these "Pook Turtles" were the first ironclads in the United States and the first in action in brown water.

The Pook Turtles were built of green timber, and the furnaces sat so close to the deck that it had to be sanded and watered constantly to prevent fires. Armored with sheets of iron only around the bows and abreast the steam engines, their main firepower consisted of three 8-inch guns forward. Now these were not the most perfect of Riverine warfare boats but they were better than those the Confederates had. Lacking the industrial capacity to produce boats and armor in any quantity, Confederate riverboats were mainly towboats and packet steamers lined with heavy inner bulwarks packed with compressed cotton. The bows were fitted with an iron ram. Later, better craft would be built by both sides. These efforts resulted in the introduction of true ironclads like the Confederate *Merrimack*, renamed *Virginia*, and the Union *Monitor*. These two would face each other off Hampton Roads in the world's first battle of the ironclads, an event that would revolutionize naval shipbuilding. The term "Iron men and wooden ships" would be replaced with "Iron men and ships of steel." Imagine the din inside one of those iron-plated vessels when a cannon ball, fired at point-blank range, crashed into one of those iron plates!

A number of other special craft were built for service on the rivers during the Civil War. These included Tinclads, Woodclads and even Cottonclads, all lighter armored. Mortar boats saw extensive use for troop support and sieges as well. They were armed with huge 13 or 14-inch mortars, and were patterned on the "floating batteries" used by the French against the Russian forts during the Crimean War of the 1850s. The vessels that were developed during the Civil War years would change the types of ships in all navies throughout the world.

Our first brown water commander was Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote, who worked closely with Grant to develop tactics of riverine warfare in the early days of the war. He, along with C. H. Davis and David Glasgow

Farragut, would develop the tactics used to control the inland waterways from the war in the East to the struggles in the western states. Our testing waters would be the Mississippi, the Yazoo, the Tennessee, the James, the Rappahannock, the Potomac and the Red River in Louisiana.

We learned our lessons and we learned them well, but the cost was high and paid in blood. When I say "we" I'm referring to both Yankees and Rebs, because each side contributed equally to the history of the Brown Water Navy. Some historians feel that if it had not been for the Brown Water Navy on the Union side, the United States would have never gained control of the Mississippi and the Civil War would have lasted twice as long and may well have turned out differently.

After the Civil War we were put on the shelf to rust until needed in China. There the Yangtze River Patrol was established to patrol 2,500 kilometers of river and to protect American lives and property prior to World War II. Here again the Brown Water sailors proved their worth and fulfilled the mission given them. Again we paid the price, especially on December 12, 1937 when Japanese aircraft, in an unprovoked attack, bombed and strafed the Gunboat *Panay*, wounding about 30 personnel and killing two. After the outbreak of World War II we were back on the shelf, except for those few sailors that operated craft on the Rhine River in Germany, until Vietnam.

After World War II the French, during the French Indo-China war, discovered how vital it is to control the inland waterways. They found out that if you are fighting any kind of war where the land mass is bisected by rivers and canals, and you do not control these waterways, your enemy will use them against you as lines of communications and transport. Plus the canals and rivers can be used to keep you from boxing him in for destruction. The French gave it a valiant effort, but they didn't have the resources and were stretched too thin.

In the early 1960s President Kennedy was emboldened by his success in the Cuban missile crisis and the State Department was driven by the "Domino Theory" that postulated that once one country succumbed to communism all the countries in the region were likely to fall. Kennedy started a vigorous effort to blunt Communist probes sponsored by China or Russia wherever they might be made. President Kennedy viewed the bloody conflict being waged by Communist-controlled North Vietnam against anti-Communist South Vietnam as a testing ground for counterinsurgency tactics designed to suppress brush-fire wars being waged by Communists. To this end, the United States began pouring economic and military assistance into South Vietnam in the early 1960's and continued to increase the military advisor forces attached to South Vietnamese units. In 1961, when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated, there were approximately 800 Americans in South Vietnam, when he was assassinated on November 23, 1963, the American presence had grown to 23,000 men, two thirds of which were armed forces advisors. Even with the increase in aid and advisors the North Vietnamese-sponsored guerrilla campaign had not been checked, and the American commitment to the South Vietnamese government steadily escalated.

This escalation increased sharply because of what happened on 2 and 4 August 1964. The U.S. destroyer *Maddox* was on an electronic-surveillance mission off the coast of Vietnam. The mission had the

code name of "DESOTO". The Maddox was in the Gulf of Tonkin, 28 miles off the coast of North Vietnam, on the sunny afternoon of 2 August when she was attacked by three P-4 class torpedo boats. During the attack four F-8E aircraft dispatched from the carrier Ticonderoga joined the action. I was then attached to the Ticonderoga with Heavy Attack Squadron Four, Detachment Bravo, as an enlisted navigator. I watched the F-8s take off and return. I was also able to sit-in on their debriefing so I know what happened. Two nights later, when the Turner Joy had joined the Maddox on patrol, they were "attacked" once more. I'm not sure this one happened. I've talked to the pilots that flew to their aid and some of them say, "Yes! There were PT boats." Some say "No! There weren't any." And some say "I really don't know if there were or not, I didn't see any." You draw your own conclusions. I honestly feel there were PT boats in the area but that an actual attack did not take place on the night of the 4th. Anyway, the attack on the 2nd was probably provoked by very recent South Vietnamese commando raids into that same coastal area under the protection of the seventh fleet and transported by American "NASTY" boats.

Six days later the U.S. Congress passed a joint "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution" that got the ball rolling and led to our full involvement in the Ten Thousand Day War. What really burns my bottom about the Gulf of Tonkin incident is that I was involved in planning the aerial mining of the harbors and approaches in North Vietnam. By the morning of 7 August we had completed all plans and were ready to put it into operation. For political reasons mining of the harbors (such as Haiphong) was delayed until 1970. But that's another story and not about the Brown Water Navy.

In February 1965, with the capture of a beached Communist ship in Vung Ro Bay, that contained 100 tons of munitions, it became evident that North Vietnamese ships were a major factor in supplying the Viet Cong along South Vietnam's coast. A tight offshore patrol called "Operation Market Time" was established. Market Time came under the command of Task Force 71 of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. In August, Market Time was turned over to Commander, Task Force (TF) 115, who was also Chief of the Naval Advisory Group. Even though Market Time cut down the flow of Communist supplies in larger vessels venturing out farther from the shore, it was not able to stop it. The North merely began to use smaller, shallow-draft craft and shifted their operations closer to the shore and to the inland waterways. So, on 18 December 1965 TF-116, the River Patrol Force known as "Game Warden", was established also under Chief Naval Advisory Group.

At the time, few of the navy's blue-water sailors foresaw that much of their work in Vietnam would be done on the inland waters by a rough and ready Brown Water Navy in which Andrew H. Foote and David D. Porter would have been at home. A century after the Yankee iron and tinclads had broken the back of the Confederacy, coastal units of TF-115 and the shallow-draft, heavily-armed boats of TF-117 River Assault Groups (RAGs) would perform similar missions in Vietnam working with the U.S. Army's Ninth Division. Yes, we were back off the shelf. And in business!

Much has been written by historians about Market Time (TF-115) and the Mobile Riverine Force (TF-117) I hope that someone who served with these units will get inspiration from what I'm writing here and tell

their story for it is one that needs to be told.

In this narrative, however, I will deal mainly with the PBR (say it, "P-Bar") forces in TF-116. More specifically, this is a story about sub-Task Force "Clearwater", a unit that operated up North in I-Corps in the areas between Hoi An and the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). But first some background on the early days of TF-116:

During March 1966 the first contingent of TF-116 became operational and was divided into two sections. These two groups were known as the Delta River Patrol and the Rung Sat Patrol. It sounds like some Cavalry unit in a John Wayne movie, doesn't it? The former was based at Cat Lo and the latter at Nha Be. The rest of Game Warden forces were to operate from three LSD's (Landing Ship Dock) and one LST (Landing Ship Tank) until the later arrival of four LST's specially modified for PBR operations. The USS Tortuga (LSD-261) was the first mobile base to arrive and began Operations in May 1966. She was anchored off shore, in the South China Sea, between the Bassac and Co Chien rivers. She had with her two UH-1B "Huey" helicopters, with navy crews, that were to support the ten PBRs assigned. Shortly after her arrival the USS Comstock (LSD-19), USS Belle Grove (LSD-2) and (LST-762) USS Floyd County followed. On April 10, 1966 USS Belle Grove began operation Game Warden patrols along the Long Tau River in the first appearance of the newly introduced PBRs.

When Game Warden was in the planning stages, it was decided to modify four LSTs to be used for Game Warden operations. These were to be the USS Garrett County (LST-786), USS Harnett County (LST-821), USS Hunterdon County (LST-B38) and (LST-846) USS Jennings County. They would replace the four temporary ships mentioned earlier. A tough decision was made in mid-year of 1966, because of the effects of the Monsoon weather on the PBRs transiting from the off-shore ship to the rivers, to move the support vessels into the sheltered waters of the major rivers. Experience showed the fear of exposing them to enemy shore fire and other enemy actions was unfounded. So when the first specially configured LST, USS Jennings County, arrived on September 19, 1966 it relieved one of the LSD's and was stationed at Vung Tau. Also on that same date U.S. Navy pilots officially took over operation of the "Huey" helicopters from the Army. These "Whirly-Birds" were to write a history of their own and on April fools day of 1967 they would be commissioned Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron THREE (HAL-3). They would be nicknamed "Seawolves". When you talk to any P-Bar Sailor mention that name and you will see a glint of admiration in his eye.

Within a couple of months all the special LSTs would be "In Country" (Vietnam). One each would be assigned to the Song Hou Giang (Bassac River), Song Co Chien and Song Ham Luang (Mekong River). You may have now noticed two items: 1. LSTs are named after Counties and 2. Song is Vietnamese for river. The fourth LST would be held in reserve and would rotate, about every six months, with the LST due for overhaul outside Vietnam. As more shore bases became available for the PBRs, the LSTs remained as mobile bases to be used where needed. By the end of 1967 TF-116 was up to its peak strength of 250 PBRs. There were twenty-five commands with ten boats each.

This is the Roll Call: Overall command was River Patrol Flotilla FIVE (RIVPATFLOT-V), with River Patrol Section 13 commanding River Squadron

51. Five One consisted of River Divisions (RIVDIV) 511, 512, 514, 515 and 521. River Squadron (RIVRON) 53 contained RIVDIVs 531, 532, 535 and 543. I was in 543.

RIVRON-55 with 551, 552, 553 and 554. RIVRON-57 had RIVDIV-571, 572, and 573. Last but not least was RIVRON-59 that included RIVDIV-592, 593, and 594.

Each RIVDIV (River Division) normally had 10 PBRs with a four-man crew assigned to each boat. This four-man crew was made up of a First Class Petty Officer (PO/1) who was the Boat Captain/Coxswain (driver), an Engineman, a Gunners Mate, and a boat Seaman. This crew cross-trained so that anyone could do the others' job. (Little did these men know when arriving in-country that one out of every three of them would be wounded during their tour with the boats.) There were normally three Chief Petty Officers, two Officers and 10 other support personnel assigned to each Division, so at any one time there would be about fifty-five men assigned to a River Division.

Up until the latter part of 1967 the PBRs had operated in the Mekong Delta area of South Vietnam. Then around September a Division was deployed to I Corps in the North. Even while this deployment was not fully successful it did demonstrate what the PBR could do. So at the end of 1967 Task Force "Clearwater" was formed in I Corps with ten boats from RIVRON-55 and RIVDIV-521 transferred to Da Nang (Tourane). In January 1968 Clearwater was conducting patrols on the Perfume River. The PBRs were based at Tan My onboard Mobile Base One (MB-1) that was constructed of "Ammi" barges. Shortly after the arrival of the PBRs on the Perfume River the VC (Viet Cong) threat was cleared up, but North of the Perfume and around the city of Hue, on the Cau Viet River, things were getting sticky! During this time frame the Marine base at Khe Sanh came under siege. The majority of Khe Sanh's supplies passed through the Navy base at Dong Ha on highway Route 9. Dong Ha was supplied via the Cau Viet River and also Route 1, when it could be kept open. Thus, Charlie (VC) and the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) knew that if they could close the supply line into Dong Ha, Khe Sanh could be taken with ease. So, with vigor, "Chuck" (Vietcong/Charlie) and his friends set out to close the Cua Viet River, using ambushes and mines. The PBRs of RIVRON-55 were dispatched to the Cua Viet to support the modified mine sweeping craft stationed at Dong Ha. When Chuck sent a LST to the bottom of the Cua Viet, near the end of January 1968, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon ordered River Assault Division One Hundred Twelve (RAD-112) of TF-117 to the Cua Viet. The reasoning of this decision is that the river craft of TF-117 are more like the infantry whereas the PBR is considered the cavalry of the river forces. This deployment of RAD-112 was delayed until March 1968 because of the Tet Offensive.

During the night of January 31, 1968 the Tet Offensive erupted through out South Vietnam. This surprise attack caught many allied units off guard, but one group that reacted immediately was the PBRs. The Brown Water Navy cavalry came to the rescue of many towns and cities in the Delta and I Corps' such as Ben Tre, Chau Doc, Vinh Long, and Hue to name a few. Not only did they inflict heavy casualties on the communist but also they kept the rivers open so the ground forces could be supplied. Because it was able to keep the Perfume River open during the offensive, RIVDIV-521 received the Presidential Unit Citation from Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable John Chaffee, personally. Don't

get me wrong, the other elements, TF-115 and TF-117, did their part but because of the swift reaction and speed of the boats, in some areas the P-BARs caught Chuck with his pants down, which resulted in a slaughter. For a long time the American forces had wanted Chuck to come out in the open; during Tet he did and much to his chagrin, he found he was no match for the Americans. From the 30th of January to the end of March the PBRs had confirmed 500 communist killed but it had cost us to the tune of 134 wounded and 6 killed.

Because of the communist attacks on the Cua Viet and Perfume rivers during Tet, TF-Clearwater (never assigned a number) was divided into two Groups, the Dong Ha River Security Group and the Hue River Security Group. The new Commander of Clearwater was Capt. T.F. Booker. In March RAD-112 arrived at Dong Ha. April was to see a Division of ten boats support Korean (ROK) troops in II Corps for operation Fierce Tiger II. Back in I Corps, even with the arrival of RAD-112, Chuck continued to sink supply and escort craft, (remember the Battle for Khe Sanh lasted until April 7), so Clearwater requested another ten boats. By June 1968 RIVDIV-543, who had been based at Nha Be, were patrolling the Cau Viet and Quang Tri river complex. RAD-112 went back to the Delta and Mine Division 112 filled in the gap left by RAD-112.

November 1968 saw 4 major river operations. On November 1st Operation "Search Turn" started along two canals in the southwestern part of Vietnam' Just north of the U Minh Forest. This water-borne barrier slowed the flow of men and materials crossing the border from Cambodia. November 3rd was the beginning of Operation "SEA LORDS" (SouthEast Asia, Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy). I just love the names they come up with, I'm not sure we ever operated on a lake but you need lake to make 'LORDS'. Of course they could have used Canal, which we did patrol, then it would have been 'SEA CORDS'. But Chuck would have thought we were referring to a navy singing group and how would that have looked? This Operation brought all three forces, TF-115, 116 and 117, together to patrol seldom touched areas south and southeast of Saigon interdicting infiltration deep in the Mekong Delta. Operation "TRAN HUNG DAO I" was a series of patrols on the Rach Thang Giang-Vinh Te Canal waterway paralleling the Cambodian border. But the most effective operation so far was "Giant Slingshot" up in the "Parrot's Beak" area on the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong rivers. As of December 1969, the operation had accounted for over 2,100 enemy killed and 600 tons of supplies captured.

By the end of 1968 the Brown Water Navy was on a roll. To give you an idea of the kind of sailor that was serving on the PBR, in 1968 alone 1 Medal of Honor, 6 Navy Crosses, 24 Silver Stars, 78 Bronze Stars and 500 Purple Hearts were awarded to these men.

January 2, 1969 saw Operation "Barrier Reef" start patrolling the 56 mile long canal complex west of Saigon which locked in the fourth and final link of naval interdiction extending from the Gulf of Thailand to Tay Ninh city in III Corps. The following day, at San Diego, CA. Light Attack Squadron FOUR (VAL-4) was commissioned and became operational with the River Patrol Force on April 19th. Operating from Binh Thuy, in the Delta, this was the first navy unit to operate the OV-10A "Bronco" aircraft. They were nicknamed "Black Ponies". When you got a couple of PBRs, Seawolfs and Black Ponies together, Chuck wished he had been transferred, elsewhere, earlier.

Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV), Admiral Zumwalt, announced a new program called "ACTOV" (ACcelerated TurnOver to Vietnamese) and opened the Small Boat School in Saigon on March 18th. RIVDIV-535 were the instructors. On October 10th eighty PBRs were officially transferred to the newly commissioned Task Force 212, VNN (Vietnamese Navy). Back in I Corps, Chuck was causing hate and discontent south of Danang. In November 1969 TF-Clearwater transferred RIVDIV-543 from Dong Ha, on the Cua Viet, to be based at Danang and operate out of Hoi An. So in three years 543 had been moved three times. From Nha Be to Dong Ha and her final move being Hoi An. 543 had made a name for herself and her name and fame would grow at Hoi An.

The rivers south of Danang, except for about 3 miles inland, were virgin territories for the Brown Water Navy. The SWIFT boats of Coastal Division 12 had penetrated the Cua Dai river from its mouth, where it dumps into the South China Sea, up to the city of Hoi An. They could not go any farther because of large sandbars and shallow water where the Hoi and Thu Bon rivers flow into the Cua Dai River. This area has a total of eleven rivers that bisect the surrounding countryside with all of them flowing into the Cua Dai. Charlie had free reign in this territory and used the rivers at will to move himself and his supplies. Except for a few stationary commands, which sent out patrols and made occasional sweeps, Chuck owned the countryside. During the day his movement was slightly hampered by observation aircraft but the night was all his. One of Chuck's main objectives was to get his supplies on the north bank of the Vinh Dien River. From here he could rocket the Danang area. When RIVDIV-543 received orders to be based at Danang, its OPORD (Operational Orders) stated "You are to deny the NVA/VC (North Vietnamese Army/Viet-Cong) Forces the use of all water ways at all times. Your AO (Area of Operations) will be all rivers, streams, canals and landmasses extending from the water line up to 500 yards. You may request and use all assets necessary to perform your mission."

What this meant, in reverse order, was; Get the support you need. Anyone within 500 yards of the water (if it was outside their base) and on the water had to have 543's permission or they could be fired upon. To kick ass, take names and don't even know how to write. To say the least, this was to upset and make Chuckles very mad. It was also to make a lot of 'em very DEAD. The first thing that the Commanding Officer, a Lieutenant, (same as a Captain in the Army) of 543 did was to find a base in the center of the AO to operate from. The reason for this was quite simple. If you had to transit most of the area Charlie would know your coming. Not a wise thing to do. Second it cut down on the transit time to any location.

The C.O. (Commanding Officer) was able to find only one location that fit his operational needs. It was a U.S. Marine Corps base, more like an outpost, about 2 miles west of Hoi An. This base was built on an Old French outpost of French Indo-China days and was the U.S. Marine Headquarters for Combined Action Group Two (II CAG). The base sat on a small stream, more like a canal, called the Cam Ha. Separating the base from the water was the main road, route 538, to Hoi An. II CAGs C.O. was more than happy to have twenty-nine fifty cal. and about twenty-one M-60 machine guns to guard his front door. True, if we had to take a boat to Danang for repairs we had to transit about 19 miles of river. But with II CAG as its main base and Danang as the secondary,

and main repair facility, 543 was within easy reach of any location in its AO. When it started operations in November the division caught Charlie off guard and there were some mean firefights. Charles also had an ally in the rivers, because it took a while for the crews to learn how to run them (know where the sandbars are so you don't run aground). By the middle of December Chuck had started to get his stuff in one bag (get organized). By the end of December 1969 no rockets ever flew into the Danang area from 543s AO.

In December I reported to RIVDIV-543 as a Boat Captain. Before I go any farther let's talk about the PBR. If ever there was a craft that was part of you, a dependable friend, one of the crew, more human than not, a boat a sailor could love, it was the P-BAR!