



The U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War

The U.S. Navy performed a wide array of missions in the Vietnam War. In the air, it was a key partner with the U.S. Air Force during the Rolling Thunder and Linebacker air campaigns against North Vietnam, and in other air operations in Laos and Cambodia. On the coast, it developed a highly effective blockade to prevent the resupply of enemy forces by sea, engaged in naval gunfire support missions against enemy targets in the littoral areas of Vietnam, and provided amphibious transport for Marines operating in I Corps. On the rivers, it stood up several task forces designed to protect commercial traffic, assist allied ground forces in pacifying these areas, and interdict enemy troops and supplies moving on these inland waterways. The U.S. Navy also supported the war effort with a massive sea and riverine logistics operation, built and managed shore facilities throughout South Vietnam, and provided extensive medical support for the allied military operation.



U.S. Navy advisors first arrived in South Vietnam in the fall of 1950, and by 1969 numbered 564. These advisors assisted the Republic of Vietnam in developing the Vietnam

Navy (VNN) that grew from 5,000 sailors and 122 vessels in 1959 to over 42,000 men and 1,500 vessels in 1972, making it the fifth largest navy in the world. Naval advisors worked throughout the war to train this indigenous navy, and experienced many hardships and much danger serving on VNN ships and craft.

The U.S. response to the North Vietnamese attack on USS *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 marked the beginning of the Navy's air and surface bombardment against North Vietnam. During the course of the war, Seventh Fleet aircraft carriers supported allied air campaigns by bombing fuel and supply facilities, power plants, bridges, and railroads in Laos and North Vietnam, and after 1970, in Cambodia. Navy surface vessels steamed up and down the coasts of both North and South Vietnam, raining down shells on a variety of targets. Rolling Thunder air and naval gunfire attacks, however, did not prove decisive. The 1965–68 interdiction campaign neither resulted in a peace treaty nor altered significantly the ground situation in the South. Linebacker attacks in 1972, by comparison, were more effective, especially in blunting the Communist Easter Offensive. During Linebacker I, the Navy flew an average of 4,000 sorties a month, which represented 60 percent of the air effort; Navy surface ships fired over 111,000 rounds at targets on the North Vietnamese coast. Navy aircraft also closed North Vietnam's

major ports in a highly successful mining operation, code-named Pocket Money. In December 1972, peace negotiations with North Vietnam stalled, compelling President Nixon to resume the air offensive. Linebacker II was a maximum effort air campaign, focusing heavily on strategic military targets in Hanoi and Haiphong. Air Force B-52s performed the brunt of the bombing missions during the operation, but Navy aircraft played a vital role in air defense suppression missions and also reseeded North Vietnam's major ports with mines.

The discovery of a 100-ton enemy trawler in Vung Ro Bay in February 1965 led to the establishment of a U.S. Navy and Coast Guard patrol force to complement the existing VNN anti-infiltration program along the 1,200-mile coast of South Vietnam. The purpose of this deployment, which became Operation Market Time (Task Force 115), was to halt the seaborne infiltration of supplies to Communist troops. Market Time represented the Navy's most successful interdiction program during the war, all but eliminating infiltration by North Vietnamese steel-hulled freighters and significantly reducing North Vietnamese resupply by sea.

In December 1965, the U.S. Navy initiated Operation Game Warden to patrol the major rivers and canals in the Mekong Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone. Consisting of a fleet of 31-foot patrol boats augmented by attack helicopters and SEAL units, this naval inshore force (Task Force 116) imposed a curfew in the region, interdicted enemy troop and supply movements, curbed Communist taxation of peasants, and hindered large-scale Viet Cong operations. Minesweeping forces and harbor defense units kept the vital waterways to Saigon and Hue and South Vietnam's major ports open for allied use. In performing these varied functions, Game Warden helped secure the major rivers in the area for commerce and extended government control to the "breadbasket" of South Vietnam, home to over six million people.

The Mobile Riverine Force was a joint Army-Navy river assault force designed to search out and destroy Viet Cong units operating in the Mekong Delta. In 1967, elements of the U.S. Army's 9th Infantry Division operating from a flotilla of armored Navy riverine craft (Task Force 117) launched a series of daring amphibious assaults in the region, achieving a 15 to 1 kill ratio against the Viet Cong. During the Tet Offensive, the Mobile Riverine Force, assisted by Task Force 116, saved the Mekong Delta by helping South Vietnamese troops defeat Viet Cong attacks on provincial capitals and other major towns in the Delta. Other riverine units based in I Corps (Task Force Clearwater) proved instrumental in keeping the Perfume and Cua Viet rivers open for supply traffic during the Tet Offensive.

Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy (SEALORDS) combined elements of Task Forces 115, 116, and 117 with the VNN to halt the infiltration of enemy troops and supplies into South Vietnam from Cambodia. Beginning in late 1968, riverine forces established new patrol barriers near the border of Cambodia and established a military and South Vietnamese government presence deep in the heart of the Mekong Delta. This campaign reduced overall Viet Cong activity in the Mekong Delta and deterred the enemy from launching a major offensive in the area during the 1972 Easter Offensive.

The merchant ships of the Military Sea Transportation Service delivered 95 percent of the military equipment and supplies consumed by allied forces in Vietnam. Navy Seabee construction units built enormous support bases at Danang and Saigon to supply all Navy and Marine Corps forces in the field as well as some Air Force and Army units. Naval Support Activity Sailors administered these logistical hubs and operated a fleet of supply craft and barges that plied the waters of the Mekong Delta and beyond. The Navy also operated two hospitals at Danang and Saigon and two hospital ships, *Sanctuary* (AH 17) and *Repose* (AH 16), staffed by Navy doctors, corpsmen, and 425 female members of the Nurse Corps.

Amphibious readiness was a unique capability shared by the Navy and Marine Corps team in Vietnam. The Marine Corps took advantage of the fleet's amphibious assault ships to launch large and small

assaults along the coast of South Vietnam. In Operation Starlight of August 1965, U.S. and South Vietnamese units wiped out the 1st Viet Cong Regiment. Subsequently, Viet Cong units generally shied away from combat with amphibious forces, ceding control of much of the coastline to allied forces. The naval command also utilized the amphibious forces as a floating reserve that could rapidly transport reinforcements to any hot spot on the coast. This was especially valuable during several set-piece battles near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) of the 1967–68 period.

A total of 1.842 million Sailors served in Southeast Asia. The Navy provided the allied effort with many unique capabilities, the most significant being the projection of U.S. combat power ashore and control of the seas to support a land war in Asia far from the United States. Overall, the Navy suffered the loss of 1,631 men killed and 4,178 wounded during the course of the war.

Source: Naval History and Heritage Command