

U.S. "Brown Water Navy" History

SAIGON The U.S. Navy transferred the last 125 of its small coastal and River Combat Boats to the South Vietnamese marking the end of the "Brown Water Navy" and completing a major step in Vietnamization. "The Vietnamese Navy ... is now ranked among the 10 largest navies in the world," said the Commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Vice Admiral Jerome H. King Jr. in his address at the mid morning transfer ceremony. Some 650 U.S. Brown Water Combat craft have been given to the South Vietnamese Navy since the start of an accelerated turnover program in November 1968.

In the four years since its inception, the Brown Water Navy fought thousands of brief but bloody battles for control of large water-bound areas of Vietnam's rice bowl and of major enemy supply routes from Cambodia. Names like "Blood Creek" "Coral Bend" "Rocket Alley" "Snoopy's Nose" "Cross Roads". Were etched into the lore of the struggle for Vietnam's crucial inland waterways as the Brown Water Navy patrolled border rivers, delta canals and shipping lanes to Saigon that run through the Rung Sat Special Zone.

Speaking of the Brown Water Sailors in 1969, during his term as Commander Naval Forces in Vietnam, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr. said "They were tigers in every respect. Tales of their courage are legend. Some of the episodes they brought off were almost unbelievable".

The Vietnamese Navy now consist of 1,500 combat and logistic vessels and nearly 40,000 men. The ninth largest navy in the world, according to naval spokesman.

There are now just under 17,000 U.S. sailors in Vietnam, down from 19,000 in 1968. Admiral Bernard A. Clarey, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, has said the Navy will continue to maintain advisors in Southeast Asia for an indefinite period. River Assault Squadron 15 (RAS-15) was the last active unit of the U.S. Brown Water Navy. The Squadrons last fight took place November 21, on the Ong Doc River, about 165 miles southwest of Saigon. When six en-

emy rockets hit around one of its boats on a night patrol. The boat made a firing run then called in a OV10 Bronco strike aircraft. There were no U.S. casualties, the enemy loss was unknown. The fight was typical of Brown Water contacts—the enemy struck by surprise with no tangible results. The best measure of success however, is the freedom with which the civilian sampans now move on the rivers they could not use before. Describing the mood of one Brown Water sailor who served in the Delta, "You sometimes felt kind of stupid. You go out in the canals and you can't see—it's so thick. There could be a 1,000 VC within a few hundred yards, but you couldn't see them. You have to wait till you get shot at.

Thought optimistic about the fighting ability of the Vietnamese Navy, some advisors note that its rapid growth has caused "critical internal problems". They cite low pay, food and housing shortages and inadequate benefits for disabled veterans. A joint U.S. and Vietnamese program called Operation Helping Hands has been developed to alleviate some of these problems. For example the Vietnamese Navy and Marine Corps need an estimated 27,000 shelters for dependents. Over 10,000 such units will be financed by this aid program, the plan also seeks to develop self-help agricultural and fishing projects to provide food for the Vietnamese Sailors and their families, many U.S. Navy men are active in these projects.

Note: This article does not mean the Brown Water Navy ceased to exist. There were many more fights to be fought in the Delta by the Brown Water sailors. Mostly as advisors to the South Vietnamese Navy. U.S. Navy Advisors were serving in the Delta as late as 1973.

Editor's Note: Though the article mentioned only the Brown Water sailors, we can not forget the U.S. Army unit's of the 9th Infantry Division that served with or supported the Brown Water Navy. On many, many occasions fighting side by side with their Navy counter parts, on the Rivers and Canals of the Delta. It was a joint effort by all who served. Bravo Zulu to each and all. MRFA

One Lucky Soldier

Or more than likely, several lucky soldiers. As a crew member aboard LST 1166 in March of 1968, I remember the night Washtenaw County lost a little paint. It began with a rude awakening to a loud bang, and the familiar call to general quarters. There was no more "incoming" that night so general quarters was uneventfully secured.

The next morning we, at least those in deck force, had to mosey over for a look at the dent in Washtenaw's port side. I, being light weight, was "volunteered" to go over the side on a painters scaffold. I took a look at the dent and then was lowered down to the pontoon side loading rail just above the water line, where I collected a few pieces of shrapnel. On the way back up, a soldier handed down his camera to take a picture of the battle scar. He said he was sleeping directly on the other side of the dent. Lucky for him, and others in the same troopside compartment, the round was not AP!

I believe it was determined from the shrapnel, and from the fact that it came in from the Dong Tam side of the river, that we were hit by an 81mm mortar round. In thinking back I have my doubts about "friendly fire" being guilty. I remember the dent being pushed almost straight in, and an arcing mortar should hit at a steep angle.

Hopefully that soldier survived the rest of his tour. Is he out there anywhere?

BOB COOMBS (LST-1166) '68-70

Like to contact Bob? Just email him: rc@pe.net

USS Askari ARL-30

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

pleted 63 job orders in 26 hours, returning the craft to line in record time.

There were many specialized requirements the Askari and her crew fulfilled during their first year in-country. But probably the most unique was the construction of a fleet of the world's smallest aircraft carriers.

This entailed the construction of a flight deck which would support medium-sized helicopters while being compact enough to mount on a 61 foot armored troop carrier. Following specifications provided by the Naval Laboratory in Washington, Askari crewmen fabricated the first one in August 1967. The first increment of "mini-carriers" proved so invaluable for re-supply and medical evacuations from the isolated areas in which the MRF operated, Askari was called upon to construct 17 more decks on other troop carriers in the force.

Another innovation by the Askari which saved many lives and possible injuries was the installation of bar trigger armor in the strategic areas of the riverine assault craft. Consisting of steel reinforcing rods welded into a grating about four inches apart, it was meant to prematurely detonate shaped

charges so that they would be partially spent before striking the actual body of the boat. While the original boats that came in-country had trigger armor around the lower decks, there was none around the super structure. This was all added by the Askari crew.

Askari like most ships that served in the Gator (Amphibious) navy had a tradition for being a hard worker and her crew was living up to those standards. This was by no means the Askari's first tour in Vietnam, it was her second tour, her first coming in 1954 during the famous "Passage to Freedom" operation when she brought many Vietnamese from Hanoi to the southern part of Vietnam.

The grueling pace required of the crew did not seem to have adverse affects on their morale, however, despite the heavy workload 20 percent of the 220 man crew extended their normal one year tour of duty in Vietnam by an additional six months.

It was estimated that 94 percent of the flotillas' assault boats were operational and ready to do their job at all times throughout Askari's first year in-country. This was a reflection of the diligence and competence of Askari's officers and men. Besides performing all of the services which are necessary to maintain a ship in the steaming tropical climate, the

crew worked on every type of Army and Navy craft which navigated the delta waterways. From the 16 foot Boston whaler to the self propelled barracks ship (APB's) which housed over 1,100 soldiers and sailors of the MRF. The Askari was a true work horse of the Brown Water Navy.

Note: In 1968 four more ARL's were added to the MRF; the USS Satyr ARL-23, USS Sphinx ARL-24, USS Krishna ARL-38 and the USS Indra ARL-37 as relief ship. It can also be noted that all four ships carried out the same tradition as the Askari. They were truly all workhorses of the brown water navy.... Bravo Zulu to all who served on these fine ships you did good. ABM

MRFA Get Well Wishes to:

Dave Bauer, USS Benewah APB-35, recently has some surgery Dave is now home doing well. You can contact him at 555 Etheldale Ave., Saint Marys, PA 15857. You may also phone 814-781-6360, or e-mail djbmb@ncentral.com.