

Army Riverine Operations in Vietnam and Panama (What the Navy Won't Tell You)

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The US Army had a navy before the US Navy was created. The original dividing line between the two, as far back as the Revolutionary War, was brown water-blue water. The US Navy, however, came in and took over brown water operations during the Great Lakes Campaign of the War of 1812; they took over the Army's Mississippi fleet during the Civil War, which is why Porter and Grant got along so well; and they married up with the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam. After the Navy took over the Army's Mississippi fleet, they wanted all the gun boats, not the transports. When the Army needed transports to deploy to Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish American War, the Army had to purchase and lease them. The US Navy did not want them, forcing the Army to create the Army Transportation Service (ATS) to provide a home for their ocean-going fleet. The ATS continued in service through World War II. That reveals the Navy's mindset. They do not like "trash haulers." The real division between the Army and the Navy is ships with guns. They do not want the logistical mission.

In 1966, the US Navy had married up with the 9th Infantry Division to create a riverine combat force in Vietnam. However, the Navy was neither involved nor interested in logistics operations. At its peak, the US Army Transportation Corps had three medium boat companies and one heavy boat company hauling men and cargo up and down the rivers and canals of the III and IV Corps Tactical Zone. In addition, the Army had another medium boat company attached the 9th Infantry Division to push its barge artillery around. The US Navy only wanted the boats with guns on them but then they did not cover the entire mission. During the Vietnam War, two infantry brigades conducted riverine operations and the US Navy only supported one. Since the Navy only supported the 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, the 1099th Medium Boat Company provided two LCMs to support the 199th Separate Infantry Brigade operating in other parts of the Delta. The US Navy also created two layers of security along the coast known as Market Time and ran PBR patrols up and down the rivers, known as Game Warden, to interdict the enemy supply lines. Their effort failed to cover the Army ports, consequently the Army created its own PBR company. In addition the Army had one medium and one heavy boat company operating along the coast. In total, the Army had five medium boat companies, two heavy boat companies, one PBR company, the *Corpus Christi Bay* and *USAT John U. D. Page* operating in Vietnam. This war was ideal for Army watercraft.

The Army's Boat Battalion

During World War II and the Korean War, the Army's landing craft fleet was divided between the Engineers and the Transportation Corps. It must be understood that the vast majority of landing craft during World War II belonged to the Army, not the US Navy or US Coast Guard. The Engineer Special Brigades had responsibility for amphibious operations and four Engineer Special Brigades conducted the landing at Normandy. At some point during the operation the Engineers handed responsibility for offloading men

and material at the beach to the Transportation Corps port commands. The amphibious truck companies (DUKWs) belonged to the Quartermaster Corps until all the trucks were given to the Transportation Corps in 1946. With the end of the Korean War in 1953, the Army disbanded its last Engineer Special Brigade and transferred the responsibility for amphibious landings to the Transportation Corps. The Transportation Corps had been recently made a permanent branch of the Army and had ownership of all Army watercraft.

On 1 September 1953, the 159th Transportation Battalion was activated at Fort Eustis, Virginia. The activation of the 159th coincided with two significant events. Because of the increase in the size of the tanks, the Army replaced its LCM-6s with the larger LCM-8s. The medium boat companies of the 159th Boat Battalion would receive the first LCM-8s. Second, the US Navy lifted the size limit on Army landing craft thus allowing the 159th to build two heavy boat companies around the new LCU-1466s. Amphibians evolved from the DUKW, a truck that could swim, to a family of Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo (LARC) vehicles ranging from the five, fifteen to sixty ton capacity.

At that time the medium boat companies were lettered from A to D, and the two heavy boats were numbered, 165th and 329th. The 159th Transportation Battalion assumed the responsibility for operating landing craft for combat and logistical support during joint amphibious operations and tactical mobility, combat and logistical support in the ship to shore missions. It became the only designated combat battalion in the Transportation Corps. Many of its original members were veterans from the recently inactivated 2nd Engineer Special Brigade, which had conducted the landings at Inchon.

On 25 September 1959, the Battalion was reorganized as HHC, 159th Transportation Battalion with Companies A, B, and C reorganized and redesignated as the 1097th, 1098th and 1099th Transportation (Medium Boat) Companies, respectively. The boat companies would follow separate lineages. D Company was disbanded. On 13 December 1965, HHC, 159th was redesignated Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 159th Transportation Battalion (Boat). The 159th also picked up the 73rd Transportation Company (Floating Craft Maintenance).

From the beginning of the Cold War in 1949, the United States expected to go to war with the Soviet Union in Europe and feared that they might target the deep draft ports of France with nuclear bombs, thus rendering them unusable. Consequently, the US Army planned on conducting a Normandy sized supply-over-the-beach operation (later renamed logistics-over-the-shore because no one wanted to work on the SOB). Every year the Transportation Corps conducted a logistics-over-the-shore (LOTS) training operation along the northern coast of France. The only time the 159th Boat Battalion came close to conducting an amphibious landing was when it staged in Florida for a possible invasion of Cuba during the Missile Crisis of October 1962. The fact that World War III never materialized, the Army considered down-sizing its watercraft fleet to pay for the billets for the expanding aviation field.

While the development of Army watercraft had been in preparation for World War III, it unwittingly prepared the Army for the next war. Vietnam was the ideal war for Army watercraft. The country was almost entirely coastline and the river and canals of the southern part were far more intricate than any road network in the country. This war would provide the high water mark for Army watercraft war.

Vietnam War

There were three build up of forces and subsequently three deployments of medium boat companies to III Corps Tactical Zone from the summer of 1965 to 1968. The 1099th arrived first and operated the main rivers and canals. The 544th was activated and sent over second and operated the rivers while the 1099th to run the canals. The 231st (USAR) was activated next and ran both the canals and rivers. The 5th Heavy Boat also worked the main rivers in the area. Tugs were also sent over from the 73rd Transportation Company to push barges up and down the main rivers.

Three boat companies conducted combat operations in Vietnam. The 1097th Medium Boat was attached to the 9th Infantry Division and the commander, CPT Pagonis, solved the problem of how to employ artillery from watercraft. The 1099th Medium Boat usually chopped two LCMs to the 199th Separate Infantry Brigade for their riverine operations. While the Navy ran patrols up and down the rivers with PBRs, the Army had to protect their ports and thus had the 458th Transportation Company trade in its LARCs for PBRs.

Area of Operations

Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) divided South Vietnam into four Corps Tactical Zones with I Corps in the north and IV Corps in the south. The Mekong and Bassac Rivers cut through the IV Corps Tactical Zone from Cambodia and emptied into the South China Sea creating a vast delta. Before reaching the sea, the Mekong River which paralleled the Bassac to the north divided into three rivulets, My Tho River to the north, Ham Luong River in the middle and Co Chien River to the south. These rivers were wide and the current flowed with the changes of the tide. Outgoing tide was about 10 knots, the speed of most Army watercraft. An LCM could be running at full throttle against the tide and be stationary in the river. With the incoming tide, the boats could travel about four knots upriver. They could do much faster coming back with the current and tide. North of My Tho River, four rivers drained into one in the III Corps Tactical Zone. The Vam Co Tay River to the south, next was the Vam Co Dong River. The Saigon River and Dong Nai River further north converged at the capitol city of Saigon.

The vast majority of cargo was handled through the Saigon port complex. Cargo ships reached Saigon by the Long Tau Channel. The ships were only allowed to travel the channel during daylight, because the Long Tau snaked through the Rung Sat (Forest of Assassins) region, which was never under friendly control. The Rung Sat was classified as a free fire zone, meaning the area was occupied by enemy combatant forces—the Viet Cong (VC). The area immediately north of Saigon was a prime target for the VC since it contained the main US military installations. The area was mostly swamp and the best means of transport was by boat.

During the colonial period, French and Dutch colonialist had the Vietnamese slaves dig an intricate network of canals throughout this vast flat delta flood plane for irrigation and transportation. The canals were just wide enough for a LCM to travel but nothing larger. At the end of the canals, there was a place wide enough for the boats to turn around but otherwise the canals only allowed one-way traffic. During the monsoon season, the whole delta flooded making it difficult to distinguish the canals from the flood plane. The river and canal system were more developed than the road network in that part of the country and more cargo was delivered by boats than trucks.

1099th Medium Boat Company

The three medium boat companies of the 159th Boat Battalion preceded it to Vietnam. The US Army had three main ports that supplied the units in the field. One medium boat company was assigned to each one. In the first two years of the war until the sub-ports established their DeLong Piers, every arriving unit climbed into a LCM or LCU and stepped off of a landing craft onto shore. The 1097th deployed to Qui Nhon and the 1098th went to Cam Ranh Bay to conduct lighterage. The 1099th operated out of the Saigon area and pushed men and material up the rivers.

The 1099th advance party arrived in Vietnam in May 1965, and was first based at Tent Camp 'B', later to become the MAC-V compound, just outside of Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon. After a stay of approximately two months, the 1099th was moved to Tent Camp 'C' later to become Camp Davis (also known to the boat people as the Fish Market). In July 1965, the rest of the company arrived in Vietnam and settled in at Camp Davis. In September 1965, the company was attached to the 11th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) of the 4th Transportation Command (Terminal) at the Saigon Port.¹

A medium boat company usually had seventeen LCM-8's. Sixteen were task craft and one was a maintenance and salvage boat. Organizationally, the unit comprised of a headquarters company, two boat sections, and a supply and maintenance platoon. The company performed various duties from recovering downed helicopters from the Dong Nai River, pushing cargo barges when tugs were unavailable in the Saigon area, pushing gravel barges from the French Fort to Tan An for the 9th Infantry Division, to direct combat support missions that put the boats and their crews in the middle of the fight.

From the 1099th Medium Boat Company's arrival in 1965 and into 1966, the unit was responsible for embarking and staging arriving units in III Corps Tactical Zone around Saigon. The 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in May 1965 and went to Bien Hoa on the Dong Nai River just north of Saigon. The 1st Infantry Division arrived in October 1965 and each of the three brigades moved to camps past the 173rd.

Once the units were in place, the 1099th transported ammunition and general cargo. The 1099th developed the general cargo line haul movement between Vung Tau at the mouth of the Saigon River and Saigon. Navigating in the murky waters of the Saigon and Soi Rap Rivers were challenging enough, but the company also had to contend with Viet

¹ Submitted by Richard Starks, 15 February 2006.

Cong snipers, rockets, and mines. Ammunition and petroleum ships were not normally unloaded at a pier due to the explosion hazard. Ammunition was off loaded from ships in Vung Tau onto barges and then the barges were pushed to the Saigon area and other ammo points along the river by LCM 8s (Mike Boats). The barges would be taken to ammo points such as Binh Trieu, Nha Be, Long Binh, Bien Hoa, Cogido and an ammo point down by "Tomahawk Island" just a short ways from Cat Lai.

Long Binh was up the Vam Co Dong River from Saigon and became the hub for land transportation operations and the home of the 6th and 7th Truck Battalions of the 48th Transportation Group.

544th Medium Boat Company

Preceding the second buildup for forces in 1966, the 11th Terminal Battalion needed another medium boat company. The 544th Transportation Company was reactivated at Fort Eustis, Virginia as the 544th Transportation Company (Medium Boat) on 14 September 1965. It deployed to Vietnam by way of Okinawa on 13 January 1966 and arrived at Vung Tau on 21 January 1966.

The 25th Infantry Division arrived in March 1966 and moved northwest to Cu Chi on the Vam Co Dong River. The 196th Infantry Brigade arrived in August 1966 and moved west to Tay Ninh further up the Song Vam Co Dong in War Zone C near the Cambodian border.

The 544th was assigned the mission of hauling cargo in the enemy infested waters of the Mekong Delta to combat units. Since the crew had to live on their boats, they built hooches on the stern deck of their LCMs. This company worked with its sister company, 1099th, in the Mekong. The 544th ran line haul up the major rivers while the 1099th also worked the canals. The 544th was later assigned the cargo missions to the ports of Binh Tuy and Dong Tam.

These units lived on their boats and subsisted on C-rations and food purchased from villages. The boats were not built with living, latrine, or showering facilities. Since the 1099th ran the canals while the 544th ran the main rivers, crews built lower hooches with collapsible masts so they could travel under the lower bridges. Laundry was performed by putting soap in the pockets and dragging the clothes behind the boat. The crew showered either in the rain or with a mud shower in the engine room with river water. The crews built makeshift shacks from wood with canvas walls. Boats that had to travel under low bridges had lower shacks. Most men however felt fortunate to have regular army mattresses compared to their comrades sleeping on the ground in the field. One or two M-60 machine guns were mounted on top of the shack and two 50-caliber machine guns were mounted on the quarterdeck. Many boats operating away from station also fashioned holes from large caliber weapons and pockmarks from smaller caliber weapons. The crew consisted normally of six members: a coxswain, first mate, chief engineer, assistant engineer, and two seamen. The men usually dressed casually—sandals, shorts, flack jackets, and helmet.

“As far as I know, LCUs did not go up the river past the Newport Bridge at the North end of Saigon, as the bridge was too low for an LCU to get under. Nor did they go up the river past Cat Lai toward Bien Hoa as the river was too shallow for an LCU to go that far up the river. Even if an LCU could go up the river toward Bien Hoa, all the farther they could go would have been Cogido, of course, that is if they could have gotten under the Cogido Bridge. Even if they could get under the Cogido Bridge, they would have had to navigate the river from Cogido to Bien Hoa, getting past the rocks in the middle of the river, (at low tide, the rocks would stand a good 4 or 5 feet out of the water) and then an LCU would have had to get under a railroad trestle just past the rocks in the middle of the river and before reaching Bien Hoa, and then go on up to Long Binh. An LCU wasn't maneuverable enough to navigate the rocks and then go under the railroad trestle. LCMs had a hard time making it, so I know that an LCU couldn't make it.

As I stated earlier, to my knowledge, ships didn't start tying up to the anchorage buoys in the middle of the river off Cat Lai until after Sep 1966 or early 1967. If I remember correctly, (it's been 40 years since then) ships were starting to tie up to the anchorage buoys at Cat Lai, but the 1099th did not start working those ships until after I left country in Sep 1966. Static boats were at Cat Lai after the 1099th moved to Cat Lai in 1967, but prior to that, the 1099th placed a static boat(s) at Nha Be to move barges around and get them set up to be moved out to ammo points along the river. This was done starting in 1965 through at least Sep 1966 when I left country.”

Richard Stark, 1099th Medium Boat, 1964-1966

5th Heavy Boat Company

In addition to the two medium boat companies the 11th Battalion needed a heavy boat company. On 1 March 1966, the 5th Transportation Company was reactivated at Fort Eustis as a heavy boat company. Over the next year it was brought up to strength with personnel and equipment and trained for service in Vietnam. It received the LCU 1466 series. These were old boats but were sent to the factory to be rebuilt for Vietnam. They came out looking almost brand new.

The personnel of the company deployed to Vietnam in an advance party and main body. The company arrived in Vietnam on 20 February 1967 and operated out of Vung Tau on the mouth of the Saigon River. The 12 LCUs were transported on two Norwegian vessels, *Teresa* and *Terra*. The vessels arrived at Vung Tau in April. A floating crane came down and lifted the LCUs off of the ships and placed them in the river. Vung Tau became the home base for the 5th Heavy Boat Company.

The LCUs delivered cargo up and down the Saigon and Mekong Rivers. Primary destinations were to the terminals at Newport, Vin Long, Cat Lai Cogido, Can To and the 9th Infantry Division at Dong Tam. They also delivered cargo to the island on the southern tip of South Vietnam. On occasions, the LCUs delivered men and tanks on amphibious operations.

The Iron Triangle in War Zone C was a haven for VC. The 199th Separate Infantry Brigade arrived in December 1966 and was stationed Long Binh and Cat Lai. From this

area upriver from Saigon, the VC would launch attacks on US installations. The 1099th Medium Boat Company provided medium boat support during 1967 and 1968 to tactical missions of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade and provided line haul cargo missions between Saigon and the Mekong Delta. Part of the company took on a direct combat support role for units of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade. During this extended stay in the field the elements transported rifle companies, conducted combat assaults, and search and destroy missions in the Mekong Delta. A few of the elements rarely returned to Cat Lai.

In January 1967, the 1099th used four boats to evacuate almost 6,000 villagers and their animals from the Iron Triangle area in Operation CEDAR FALLS.

In early 1967, the 1099th Medium Boat Company received a request to mount a 105mm howitzer on an LCM-6. Only the Navy had LCM-6s. They did not have as much power as the LCM-8s. The company commander called for volunteers for two crews. SP4 David L. Miller volunteered to be the coxswain. His LCM-6 received the howitzer and the other boat served as a back up. His boat carried the four man crew of the howitzer and a platoon of infantry. General Westmoreland came down to look at the howitzer on the LCM. The crews had to tear down their hooches built around the pilot house. After Westmoreland left, they rebuilt their hooches.

The two LCMs would anchor out in the South China Sea in the mouth of the river. They would receive a call giving them the grid coordinates of where to go. They would reach the destination and drop ramp on the beach. The gun would fire several rounds of beehive to clear the area, then the infantry would sweep the area of enemy and provide security. The artillery would then provide fire support for infantry in another location. To adjust rounds, the boat would have to use its screws to turn directions as the howitzer could only turn so far in the well deck of the LCM. Upon completion of the fire mission, the two boats would pull back out into the mouth of the river and wait. The infantry and artillery rotated their crews weekly.

Two LCM-8s were later modified into offensive tactical craft. One boat had its well deck covered with a platform. Helicopters utilized the platform as a helipad for UH-1B and UH-1D helicopter gun ships. The second boat had a 105 mm Howitzer and 4.2" mortars mounted on the decks. Some elements returned only every few months to Cat Lai for resupply of material and crewmen; mostly they operated from desolate firebases accessible from helicopter or boat. The 1099th even once transported a herd of water buffalo to replace water buffalo killed during a firefight. The goodwill gesture injured 50% of the soldiers involved in the transport.

On 31 March 1967, the 11th Battalion moved south to Cat Lai to open up a mid-stream ammunition discharge facility to augment the Saigon port. Cat Lai was then an undeveloped area that appeared to be almost inhabitable. With ingenuity and perseverance, a Base Development Plan for the Cat Lai Compound was contrived and implemented. The soldiers constructed Operational centers, as well as troop billets and recreational facilities. Challenged with self-sustainment, the battalion became a model among Free World units within the Republic of Vietnam. The battalion's mission

became the operation of the Cat Lai Army Terminal and cargo line haul operations on waterways in the Mekong Delta. It had one stevedore company along with tug boats and LCMs to haul the ammunition up river.

Cat Lai Army Terminal became a port for ammunition barges in late 1966 or early 1967 when the 1099th moved there. Ammunition and petroleum ships would then tie up to anchorage buoys in the middle of the river and the ammunition would be loaded onto barges or lighter boats (LCU's and LCM's). From Cat Lai the ammunition was pushed up to depots at Long Binh and Bien Hoa. One boat, "Cat Lai Static," was on a moments notice to deliver electric forklifts and batteries to ocean vessels to unload ammunition. Other boats performed routine duties such as hauling cargo from Saigon to Vung Tau and back. Others hauled ammunition either as cargo or by pushing barges Cat Lai to Cogido (the port for the depots at Long Binh and Bien Hoa). The River Rats motto was "We haul anything, anytime, anywhere."

The congestion of traffic at Saigon Port made it obvious to the 1st Logistical Command that it needed an additional port facility to augment the Saigon area. The massive buildup of American troops and the required cargo to sustain them overtaxed the capabilities of Saigon Port. This created a huge congestion of ships waiting in Vietnamese waters. General William Westmoreland, Commander of US Military Assistance Command, directed his staff to develop plans for the construction of a port facility up river near Long Binh. Navy CBs began construction on the \$50,000,000 port facility.

Initially the Navy CBs constructed two Navy LST ramps, an LCU ramp and a wharf capable of handling seven barges. In October 1966, the stevedores of the 71st Battalion went to work offloading cargo at the ramps and wharf. The 117th Terminal Service Company from Saigon came in August on temporary duty discharge barges at the barge site. The battalion worked in 12-hour shifts. The engineers then constructed four berths for deep draft, ocean-going vessels, one which could handle roll-on/roll-off ships. Additional facilities included both warehouses and open storage space behind each pier, plus a large parking area for the sea-land containers. As the engineers completed the port of Newport, the 71st Battalion offloaded its first deep draft vessel in April 1967. The port officially opened on 11 July. The new water terminal facility north of Saigon was appropriately named Newport. It received its first container ship in October.

The newest docks in the Saigon area served rerouted ships, which formerly tied up much of Saigon Port's traffic. They were also refined for expedient handling of USAID/CIP cargo. From then on Newport discharged military cargo and personnel for delivery by 48th Transportation Group trucks to units throughout Military Region III. It was a rewarding experience for the stevedores to actually move real cargo.

On 29 August 1968, HHD, 159th Battalion then deployed to Vung Tau, at the mouth of the Saigon River, where it assumed responsibility for the 5th Heavy Boat, 1099th Medium Boat and 124th Terminal Service Companies. It became a part of the 4th Transportation Command.

On 17 July 1968, LCU 1577 *Sunset Strip* took the wrong turn up the Mekong River into Cambodia. The vessel and its crew were detained for nearly five months by the Cambodian government. Since Cambodia was neutral, the crew was simply detainees and not prisoners. They were very well treated by the Cambodian government but detained longer than any other Americans who had fallen into Cambodian hands. The Cambodians hoped to negotiate a trade for the crew and boat, but the American government would not give in. Consequently, the crew was released and the boat was retained.

231st Medium Boat Company (USAR)

In the summer of 1965, the advisor war in South Vietnam escalated to the US Army assuming a greater role in ground combat with three troop buildups from 1965 through 1967. President Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to avoid calling up the Reserves in this war and fight it with the draft instead. For the Transportation Corps, most of the new units were organized about four months before their deployment. Beginning on the night of 31 January 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army launched its largest offensive to date in an effort to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. The quick need for reinforcements finally required the activation of Reserve units. On 13 May 1968, the 231st Transportation Company was one of 76 Reserve and National Guard units activated. Of the 183 personnel, 70 percent were from St Petersburg and the rest from Tampa. CPT Reilly still commanded the company with 2LT Joseph P. "Joe" Vetrano as his XO and 1SG Ray Armstrong still was as the company's top sergeant.

In August 1968, CW2 Phil Edwards deployed with his first sergeant, 1SG William Raymond Armstrong, and about six others with all their gear which included winter gear for the northern part of Vietnam. They assumed they were going to Da Nang. They flew from Newport News to Travis AFB, California with their gear. No one at Travis knew about the unit moving to Vietnam. Finally they put the advance party on a plane to Long Binh. When they landed with their 1500 pounds of gear, Edwards could not find anyone who knew anything about the 231st arriving in Vietnam. After lots of phone calls, Edwards finally found someone in the 4th TRANSCOM. They put them up in a hotel. The commander sent for Edwards and his first sergeant. Someone picked them up and took them to the 4th TRANSCOM headquarters. The commander apologized and explained that they were attached to the 159th Transportation Battalion which was in the process of moving south to Vung Tau and had not arrived to yet. The 4th TRANSCOM loaded the advance party on a LCU at Newport and carried them to Vung Tau. When Edwards arrived, the advance party of the 159th Transportation Battalion had just arrived. Edwards reported to someone in the 159th advance party. That was the only other unit he remembered there.

Edwards had to find out where he was going to billet the company which would arrive in a couple weeks. His advance party was hand picked. They had first pick of location. They went down and picked the best buildings and wooden barracks. The 159th Battalion provided jeeps and a deuce and a half to get their work done. Edwards was taken downtown to the Pacific Hotel where the officers would live. Edwards' advance party had everything ready when his company arrived on C130s on 7 September 1968. The

advance party took the men in and got them billeted. The CO then took over and Edwards went back to being a platoon leader.

Over the next two months, the men of the company prepared for operations in the Delta. The first task was preparing their boats. Prior to leaving the States, the company's LCMs were uploaded on several ships along with 3-4 warrant, one for each ship. The boats started arriving shortly after the company did. The crews had to get their boats operational. They were told to build hootches on the sterns of their LCMs. The crew of a LCM was six people but it only needed three to operate it. Six people provided 24-hour operations. As a Reserve unit, the company had unbelievable talent. The company built hootches with six racks, cooking stoves, latrines and shower stalls. On the roof of the hootch, they placed two 55-gallon drums on starboard side with fresh drinking water they picked up from the beach. The supply sergeant requisitioned 5,000-gallon water tanker. On the port side, they put in porcelain flushing toilets. The toilet was powered by a 55-gallon drum filled with river water. The hootches had corrugated tin roofs.

Unhappy with how exposed his gunners were 1SG Armstrong scrounged or stole enough steel from a supply depot to weld gun tubs for his gunners. Each Mike boat had two mounted .50 caliber machineguns, two handheld M60s and two M79 grenade launchers. Since Ray Armstong had been with the unit since it was activated, the men called him, "Granddad," and named the 231st Transportation Company in his honor, "Granddad's Gators." He was known for being fair and was the glue that held the unit together. The boats flew the Florida flag on the bow and the national ensign over the hootches.

The second task for the men was to become familiar with the landmarks and the intricate tides and currents of the Delta. The tides from the South China Sea washed all the way up the rivers to the Cambodian border. The 231st Medium Boat had arrived in Vietnam right after an LCU made the wrong turn into Cambodia. From then on each boat or convoy had to have someone who was a pilot when operating in that area where the boat made the wrong turn. While the men were building hootches on their LCMs, the coxswains and platoon leaders rode in LCUs of the 5th Heavy Boat through the Delta. A skipper was required to make 12 trips to become qualified as a pilot.

Edwards was told that his platoon would go into Binh Tuy on Bassac, the southern most river in the Mekong Delta, to haul the equipment and supplies for a construction unit commanded by a colonel. Binh Tuy was a depot and staging area where Navy LSTs and Army LCUs dropped off supplies. The US Army was just moving into the Delta on the heels of the Tet Offensive. They needed to build airfields and facilities throughout the Delta. Edwards' platoon became the "trucking company via canals" for the engineers.

Edwards' platoon moved into its staging area in October. The first sergeant, 1SG Armstrong also went with the platoon. Edwards' crews lived on their boats while he and his first sergeant lived in tents with the wooden sides. VC prisoners built the bunker for their operations center.

During the first few missions, Edwards' command post (CP) lost communication with his boats once they sailed out of sight. He then acquired a 90-foot telephone pole and had the engineers erect it next to his command post. Edwards had a soldier in his platoon who was a pole climber for the telephone company. He scrounged the climbing gear and mounted the antenna for the Army radio. Edwards never had communication problem again. He had an unexpected visit from Army guys in khaki from Saigon. He could talk to his command back to Vung Tau. They wanted to know how he was talking to everyone. Edwards showed them his telephone pole.

2nd Platoon had six boats but the company would send more boats if they needed them. Edwards usually sent out three or four boats on missions at a time. The missions usually took three to four days to complete. The boats would spend a day loading the engineer cargo and equipment. They would then rendezvous out in the river with two Vietnamese gunboats. One gun boat would run ahead and the other behind the LCMs to escort them into the canals. The convoy would then sail up river in one day and the LCMs would nest together and anchor midstream at the entrance to the canal. He always sent out three or more boats out in convoy. Early the next morning the boats would enter the canal and drop off its cargo and equipment at the engineer camp. Edwards had a policy that all of his boats would be out of the canals before dark. The canals were too narrow for any boats to maneuver or turn around. Even if the boats were not completely unloaded, they left in time to get back out into the river before nightfall. They would anchor at night then return to canal or Ben Thuy the next morning. The next morning the boats would sail out and running with the current reached Binh Tuy in one day.

Edwards had a policy that his men would never fire at the locals animals, swamp the villagers' boats or do anything to anger the local Vietnamese. He encouraged them to throw food and candy at the kids as they passed by to keep them friendly. He believed for that reason his boats were rarely fired upon. His boats were only caught in a couple firefights but received no casualties. After they had been in country a couple months, the ARVN gunboats opened fire in a free fire zone and drew fire from the jungle on the convoy. The LCMs ran through it and no one was hit. On another occasion, some LCMs from an active duty medium boat company out of Vung Tau delivered their cargo directly to the engineers in the canals rather than transfer the load to the 231st at Binh Tuy. People could identify each boat company by the different style of hooches built on the boats. This convoy of boats drew fire in the canal and received casualties. Edwards sailed on the next mission in the same area and nothing happened. Edwards assumed the other boats did something to offend the locals and he insisted to higher headquarters from then on that only his boats travel in those canals.

A quarter of a mile down the road from Binh Tuy was a SEAL team headquarters that went out looking for Charlie at night. Edwards would go down there in the morning and sit in on their security briefings. If he thought there was some possible trouble he went with his boats. Otherwise he sent out a staff sergeant in charge of the convoy. LCMs were skippered by a sergeant. SSG were squad leaders and skippered their own boats. When the crews saw Edwards come down to the boats with his pillow, sleeping gear and overnight bag, they knew it was not going to be a routine run.

Late in his tour, battalion sent down a lieutenant to observe operations. When out in the river at night they lashed together and anchored midstream. The lieutenant ordered the staff sergeant in charge to anchor further up stream. The staff sergeant told the lieutenant that the anchors would not hold in that part of the stream. The currents in the canals and rivers were six knots. The staff sergeant gave in and anchored where the lieutenant told him. That night the anchors pulled free and the boats were adrift with the current. The crews woke up and tried to break their boats free and fire up their engines. They saw the Navy's brown water fleet anchored downstream and they were heading right for it. The LCM came up alongside the mother ship whose anchor caught the roof of the hootch and pulled it right off the deck. It took everything to include personal possessions and weapons. The only thing left was the door frame. Each hootch had a door on each side. Edwards heard about the problem on the radio. He was waiting for the boats when they came in the next day. All the boats had their hootches except one. The deck was bare except the door frame and a crew member was standing in it. This gave Edwards a chuckle. He sent the lieutenant back to battalion with reprimands. He also had to send the LCM back to Vung Tau for repairs.

Edwards left the company after six or seven months in Vietnam. One day he went out and had dinner with the Navy commander of the riverine fleet. The commander told Edwards that they knew exactly when his boats were going out on missions and where. Each time they had divers and demolitions men on standby alert in the event one of the boats was sunk by a mine. They could not afford to have a boat block the canal. The team would immediately deploy to the area and destroy the sunken boat so as not to block the narrow canal. This thought brought chills down the back of Edwards' neck.

The whole time Edwards was in Vietnam, he had been communicating with Department of Army and Fort Eustis about staying on active duty. He was transferred to the 5th Heavy Boat at Vung Tau around April 1969. He was assigned LCU 1513. He spent the rest of his tour in Vietnam. 17 months later, he returned to Vietnam on the *USAT Page*.

The other platoons of the 231st Medium Boat Company delivered cargo from Vung Tau up river to the 9th Infantry Division in Dong Tam. In October 1968, the 329th Heavy Boat and 544th Medium Boat Companies also arrived at Vung Tau as part of the massive buildup in the Delta. These missions usually took four to six days to complete. In an effort to pacify the Dinh Tuong Province, IV Corps Tactical Zone ordered the 9th Infantry Division to conduct offensive operations as soon as the dry weather season began on 1 December 1968. The Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS was designed to take the war to the enemy in the Delta and sever his supply lines from Cambodia.

In preparation for the operation, the boats of the other two platoons of the 231st had to transport hundreds of tons of construction equipment and thousands of tons of construction materials to the engineer units in remote areas of the Delta over canals which had not been previously used by the US troops. Convoys from the boat companies of the 159th Battalion ran from Dong Tam and Vung Tau up the Vam Co Tay River to Moc Hea under escort from Navy Escort Vessels. Prior to that, neither the Army nor

Navy had operated boats in that river, which was considered “Charlie Country.” They literally opened the Tam Co Tay for river traffic.

The 9th Infantry Division committed seven battalions to this search and destroy operation in the Dong Tam area. This operation was designed to sever the enemy supply lines from Cambodia and deny them the use of base areas. In 1969, the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division continued the operation in Dinh Tuong Province, using its highly successful night ambush tactics while the 2nd Brigade continued its mission with the Mobile Riverine Force. The boats of the 159th Battalion out of Vung Tau provided support for this operation.

With the completion of the construction phase of Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS, the boats turned to hauling large quantities of cement and lime for the Engineer Construction Units to rebuild Route (QL) 4, the main artery stretching from Saigon south through the Delta to Ca Mau. Known as “The People’s Highway,” it provided commercial traffic to the towns of Moc Hea, Tri Ton, Nha Knot, Vi Thanh, Soc Trang and Ben Tre. These became ports of call for the LCMs of the 231st Medium Boat.

SPEEDY EXPRESS ended on 31 May 1969 and the 9th Infantry Division claimed 10,899 known enemy casualties compared to a loss of only 40 Americans killed in action and 312 wounded. However, the operation only uncovered 748 captured enemy weapons. Consequently, the operation later came under criticism by Kevin Buckley writing for *Newsweek* on 19 June 1972 as one of the worst atrocities of the war. He claimed that one US official admitted that the operation killed as many as 5,000 civilians in the Kien Hoa Province. Sometime during that first six months, CPT Reilly turned the company over to LT Vetrano.

In January 1969, LTC Tom Collins assumed command of the Battalion. SPEEDY EXPRESS ended on 31 May 1969 and the 9th Infantry Division claimed 10,899 known enemy casualties compared to a loss of only 40 Americans killed in action and 312 wounded. However, the operation only uncovered 748 captured enemy weapons. Consequently, the operation later came under criticism by Kevin Buckley writing for *Newsweek* on 19 June 1972 as one of the worst atrocities of the war. He claimed that one US official admitted that the operation killed as many as 5,000 civilians in the Kien Hoa Province.

During 1969, the 544th was selected as the project unit to prepare the LCMs of the 1097th over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This was completed on December 1969. In March 1970, the company moved its headquarters to Saigon then Long Binh in April. In June the company sailed north to establish its headquarters at Chu Lai in the I Corps Tactical Zone. The 2nd Platoon supported the Americal Division at Chu Lai in 1970. It received the Meritorious Unit Commendation for 2nd Platoon’s support with the 403rd Transportation Company (Terminal Transfer) during the South Vietnamese operations Lam Son 719, Lam Son 720 and others from 1 December 1970 to 31 May 1971. After the close of port operations in November 1971, it was the last company to leave Chu Lai. It moved down to Tan Mi where it was used as a security company with the 277th Service

and Supply Battalion. The 544th Medium Boat was inactivated, under the command of CPT Stanley Akins, on 20 March 1972.

As part of Operation SWITCH 231, the 231st Medium Boat Company transferred 19 of its LCM8s to the 203rd Medium Boat Company (ARVN) on 19 August 1969. This was part of the Vietnamization Program to turn the war over to the Vietnamese Army. The 231st Medium Boat Company completed 14 months of combat duty without the loss of a single man killed or wounded, returned to Florida and was released from active duty on 30 August 1969. As they arrived at the Tampa International Airport, they were greeted by lavish praise and grateful thanks for their safe return. The company received the National Defense Transportation Association Annual Award for 1969.

In the first half of 1969, the 1099th provided support of Logistics-Over-The-Shore (LOTS) operations with the 321st Transportation Company (Truck) and 124th Transportation Company (Terminal Service) while also continuing its combat support role. For the second half of 1969, the 1099th moved supplies throughout the Cogido, Saigon, and Vung Tau area and still providing combat support to Vietnamese and Army Ranger troops. In 1970 the 1099th was reassigned to the 159th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) where it operated to the boundaries of the III and IV Corps Tactical zones and the South China Sea and Codigo, Saigon and Bien Hoa areas and was involved in combat support operations in the U Minh Forest during the last part of 1970. In order to support the 21st Vietnamese Division search and clear operations, the 1099th's LCM-8's were fitted with 5000 gallon POL tanks or 10,000 gallon bladders to bring JP4 from the mouth of the Song Ong Doc River to Thoi Binh. The company remained in Vietnam until January 1971 when it was inactivated.

After Vung Tau was phased down in January 1970, the 159th Battalion relocated to Cat Lai where it assumed responsibility for mission of the 11th Terminal Battalion which was about to be inactivated. As MACV began to turn logistical operations over to the ARVN, units began to turn over their LCMs and LCUs to Vietnamese soldiers and boat companies left. The 1099th Medium Boat Company was inactivated in January 1971. With little need for a terminal battalion, the 159th Battalion was inactivated in Vietnam on 29 June 1971. The 544th Medium Boat Company was inactivated in March 1972. The 5th and 329th Heavy Boat Company left in April 1972.

The 1099th was the most decorated boat transportation unit in Vietnam. For its service in Vietnam the unit earned the Army Meritorious Unit Commendation for Vietnam 1965-1966, 1966-1967, 1968, and 1970-1971 and the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm for Vietnam 1971 decorations. The unit also received campaign credits for Vietnam, Defense Counteroffensive Phases I to VII, Tet Counteroffensive, Sanctuary Counteroffensive, Consolidation I and II, and Ceasefire. The company also received the National Defense Transportation Award for the most outstanding Army Transportation Unit for 1966 and 1970.

In 1969, the 5th and 329th Transportation Company headquarters combined at Vung Tau under Captain Murphy. The combined companies had 27 LCUs, two J-boats, four reefer

barges and five tugs. In 1969, the company headquarters moved to Cat Lai where it took up the mission of uploading ammunition and hauling it upriver to destinations in III and IV Corps Tactical Zone. In 1970, the company merged with the US Army Harborcraft Company (Provisional) and retained the name of the 5th Heavy Boat Company until its inactivation at Newport on 29 April 1972. The company received campaign credits for Counteroffensive, Phase II, Phase III, Phase IV, Phase V, Phase VI, Tet Counteroffensive, Tet/69 Counteroffensive, Sanctuary Counteroffensive and Consolidation I and II.

Market Time and Game Warden

When the a trawler was intercepted at the mouth of the Saigon River in Vung Ro Bay carrying ammunition and weapons to the Viet Cong on 16 February 1965, it became clear that the enemy was supplying its forces by sea. This prompted the Navy to create two layers of coastal security using destroyers and Coast Guard cutters on the outer belt and swift boats in the inner belt. This operation known as Market Time was operational on 24 March 1965. It was originally under the control of CTF 71 but it was disbanded and control shifted to TF 115. By 1966, the US Navy also assigned pairs of PBRs to patrol the rivers and canals in search for supplies. This operation known as Game Warden fell under the control of TF 116. There were still some areas that neither Market Time nor Game Warden covered, so the Army Transportation Corps filled the gap in port security.

458th Transportation Company (PBR)

The 458th arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, on 13 October 1966; at that time it was the only logistical, amphibious unit in the Operating Theater. The LARC Vs and other company equipment arrived at Vung Tau on another vessel. By the time the 458th members were united with their equipment, another LARC unit had arrived at Vung Tau.

The 458th had the mission to transport men and equipment from ship to shore where ever needed. Besides the LST beach at Cam Ranh Bay, they operated at Nha Trang, Phan Rang, Phan Thiet, and Vung Ro Bay. At Phan Thiet, 5 LARCs supported the 2nd Battalion 7th Cavalry during Operation Byrd.

The company adopted the nickname, the “Sea Tigers.” First Sergeant Flynn asked John Hoeker to draw a Sea Tiger. The only picture of a tiger that John could find was the Esso Tiger in a magazine ad so he used that as inspiration.

The company, while under the command of First Lieutenant R. A. “Pete” Sellers, received six Boston Whalers to conduct harbor patrols in August 1967. The company’s mission was transitioning from logistical and ship-to-shore operations to inland-water security and port security tasks. As the 458th was a unit transitioning from one major mission to another, 1LT Sellers attended strategy sessions with the 18th Military Police Brigade Commander and headquarters staff to create a plan to employ and support both the Boston Whalers and the inbound Patrol Boats Riverine (PBRs). The 458th built their own flotation pier for the boats on South Beach of Cam Ranh Bay so they could remain in and near company operations area rather than use the LST beach landing site.

The Boston Whalers were assigned for use until the company received its Patrol Boat, River (PBR) MK IIs in early 1968. The 458th became the only PBR company in the US Army. The Transportation Corps provided one coxswain and engine man for each boat. There was also a Military Policeman as the forward gunner and a South Vietnamese soldier as the interpreter.

The PBR crews were initially sent to the U. S. Navy facility at Nha Be, California, for training. All replacement crew members coming from the United States would go through four weeks of Army security boat training at the Naval Inshore Operations Training Center at Mare Island, California.

The company headquarters moved to Vung Tau then to a Military Police compound at Ton Son Nhut Air Base in the Saigon area in March 1968, where it came under the control of the 92nd Military Police (MP) Battalion of the 18th Military Police (MP) Brigade. It was also the only Transportation Corps unit assigned to the Military Police Corps. The company positioned detachments of four PBRs, each, to First Logistics Command ports at Qui Nhon, Vung Ro Bay, Vung Tau, Newport, Cat Lai and Cat Lo. Each PBR detachment worked with a different MP company. The detachment at Vung Tau was attached to the 720th MP Company at Long Bien. The detachment at Qui Nhon came under the control of the 127th MP Company, 93rd MP Battalion. They searched sampans and set up night ambushes to disrupt enemy supply lines. They conducted harbor and river patrol and ammunition ship security throughout the Qui Nhon area. In total the 458th patrolled 500 miles of inland waterway and canals. The unit designation was changed to the 458th Transportation Company (PBR) under the command of Captain Edward F. Ginsburg. The next Commander was Captain Robert L. Amick, Jr.

On 29 January 1969, while flying his L19 "Bird Dog" on a routine aerial observation flight, CPT Lermon N. Jenk spotted what appeared to be camouflaged sampans and bunkers along the edge of the harbor. Jenk radioed the position of sampans and bunkers to the Army PBR detachment out of Qui Nhon patrolling the waters of Qui Nhon. Ten minutes later three PBRs nosed around through the dangerously shallow waters to investigate the dike area. The Canh Sat (national police) had confirmed that the activity was enemy. The MPs on board the PBRs called for the VC to come out and surrender. Several enemy emerged from the bunker trying to run away. The PBRs opened fire with their .50 caliber machine guns. SP4 James E. Brady's PBR came under intense enemy return fire. He received a shrapnel wound in his left shoulder but continued to maneuver his boat to advantageous firing positions. CPT Jenk wrote in his report that "the PBR crewmen maneuvered their craft and continually exposed themselves so they could place more effective fire on the enemy." All three boats fired on enemy positions radioed to them by Jenk flying overhead. Throughout the fight Brady refused medical attention to operate his boat. At one point one of the machineguns jammed and he left the helm to help the gunner fix the weapon. The boats pulled back for several air strikes. Because Brady effectively blocked the escape routes of the sampans, he had sealed the enemy escape routes by water. When they went back in the MPs searched the area and found at least 15 enemy dead, ten enemy bunkers and 20 sampans. Jenk concluded that "The courage and intelligent decisions of these PBR crewmen were in keeping with the highest

traditions of the military and reflected on themselves, their unit and the United States Army. SP4 Brady earned the Bronze Star Medal with V device for his actions.

Specialist Four James A. Loux distinguished himself while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam. Assigned to the 458th River Patrol Boat Company, Specialist Loux was a seaman aboard a river boat transporting aviation fuel in support of combat operations near Cho Thu Bay Village. When his boat struck an enemy mine and was engulfed in flames, the enemy force laid down a deadly crossfire directed from both sides of the canal. Although gravely wounded, Specialist Loux immediately raced to his machine gun and returned fire. He continued to fire on the hostile force until the hostile force broke contact. These actions enabled the rest of the vessels to proceed on their mission. Specialist Four Loux died of his wounds on April 5, 1971. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for gallantry.

The 458th was inactivated in Vietnam on 1 September 1971. As part of the 18th Military Police (MP) Brigade, the 458th received the Meritorious Unit Commendation for the period of 26 September 1967 to 31 October 1968 and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm for 1966 to 1973.

Artillery barges of the 9th Infantry Division 1097th Medium Boat Company

In September 1966, the US Navy created its Riverine Assault Flotilla One (TF 117). The 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division arrived in January 1967 and conducted its shakedown training in the Rung Sat swamps then move to its new base camp near My Tho which they named Dong Tam. The 2nd Brigade then married up with TF 117 to form the first “riverine” division in the US Army. The 2nd Brigade was specifically equipped for combat operations in river delta operations, like the Mekong Delta. The best way to transport troops and equipment in such an environment was by boat. A portion of the division’s forces was afloat, while the rest was land based. The portion afloat lived aboard LST’s and barracks ships. The US Navy provided riverine gun boats in support of the Army combat operations. The riverine force operated in the Mekong Delta for two years. There was one area that the Navy was unable to fulfill – floating artillery. Their LCM-6s were too small and underpowered to maneuver barges in the currents in the rivers of the Mekong Delta. Army watercraft came to the rescue. Since all the boat companies in the Delta were committed to delivering cargo, MACV had to borrow a boat company from further up north.²

The 1097th Medium Boat Company “River Raiders” had arrived in Vietnam on 30 May 1965 and based at Cam Ranh Bay. It conducted ship-to-shore lighterage from Vung Ro Bay to Phan Rang. On 26 June 1967, the company, under the command of CPT William G. Pagonis, moved to Dong Tam where it was assigned to the 9th Infantry Division. Upon arrival, the 1097th received the mission to transport the twelve 105mm howitzers of two artillery batteries of the 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery in support of the waterborne 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. The US Navy only had smaller and less powerful LCM-

² Shelby L. Stanton, Vietnam Order of Battle, Washington, DC: US News Books, 1981.

6s. Since nothing like this had been done before the solution would challenge Pagonis' imagination.³

Pagonis' plan was to mount two 105mm howitzers on barges pushed by an LCM-8. The barges would allow the howitzers to traverse 360 degrees and fire in any direction. There were six tubes to a battery so three LCM-8s could haul one battery. The 1097th was authorized 19 LCM-8s, but on 9 July when he received the mission, he only had 16 LCMs. His operational readiness rate was running about 90 percent, which meant about two LCMs would be down for maintenance at anyone time. He gave nine LCMs to his 1st Platoon to maneuver the two batteries of the 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery. Two remaining LCMs hauled ammunition. In the well-decks, he housed two fire direction centers, two battery command posts, one first aid station and one battalion command post. The LCM-8 with the fire direction center in its well deck towed a barge used as a helicopter landing zone. His 2nd Platoon only had five LCMs. Two maneuvered the two 4.2-inch mortar barges. One had the floating day room and another transported a 5000-gallon fuel tanker. One LCM maneuvered the maintenance barge and its well-deck was constructed to house prisoners for interrogation. Another boat was used for test firing a 155mm artillery piece. The fifth boat was sent on special duty to battalion headquarters.⁴

The maintenance platoon had one LCM, the damage control vessel (DSV), equipped with a welder and water pump, and Pagonis had a Floating Maintenance Facility Barge designed and constructed to perform second and even third and fourth echelon maintenance. Since the entire company maneuvered as a unit, Pagonis moved his headquarters and communications section onto the maintenance barge. Two LCMs maneuvered the maintenance barge and it was usually anchored with the Navy Task Force 117. It had a shower, living quarters, barber shop, orderly room aboard. Pagonis left his headquarters platoon back at Dong Tam under the command of his first sergeant and created a field first sergeant to work with the commander in the field. Pagonis left the stevedores of his 567th Detachment with one LCM back at Dong Tam to off-load LCUs and maneuver barges in the harbor and for trash runs and APC runs for Dong Tam and Task Force Funston. This organization required all available LCMs so Pagonis put in a request for three additional LCMs.⁵

Because the crews would live on boats during combat operations, the maintenance personnel constructed living quarters in the rear of the boats and welded armor plating to the pilot houses. They also constructed a first aid station in the well-deck of one of the boats. To keep morale high, Pagonis even had a day room constructed in the well-deck of another LCM. The 1097th Medium Boat became operational on 1 August 1967 and became the only tactical boat company in the Transportation Corps. In a sense, it was fulfilling the combat mission the company had inherited from the Engineer Special Brigades.⁶

³ 1LT Douglas R. Magee, "The Striking History of the 1097th Transportation Company," April 1997.

⁴ CPT William G. Pagonis, "Mission and Organizational Structure of 1097th Transportation Company (Medium Boat)," and CPT William G. Pagonis, "1097th Transportation Company (MB) Support Plan for the 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery," 4 August 1967, in Magee, "1097th."

⁵ Magee, "1097th."

⁶ Pagonis, "Mission."

No sooner than it was operational, the 1097th and its barge artillery went into action. The lowlands bordered by the Rach Nui Canal in eastern Long An Province became the scene of furious fighting following a 19 June river assault by the 3rd and 4th Battalions of the 47th Infantry during Operation CORONADO I. The 1097th moved an artillery battery into position with its six boats on mission at that time. Three days later a sweep of the rice paddies and tropical tree lines by the Mobile Riverine Force battalions of the 3rd Brigade, ARVN and other forces, caught the 5th Nha Be Battalion between it and a blocking force from the 3rd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division resulting in 531 enemy casualties during the 54 days of the operation.⁷

Just prior to the 1968 lunar Tet truce, the 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division launched riverine operations in the marshlands of the Mekong Delta as part of Operation CORONADO X. While the Mobile Riverine Force was conducting searches in the rice paddies of western Dinh Tuong Province, the Viet Cong attacked the city of My Tho on 31 January heralding the beginning of the 1968 Tet Offensive. At 1730 hours on 31 January, the 2nd Brigade received the order to go to the relief of the city. At that time, elements of the 2nd Brigade were located near Fire Support Bases ALABAMA, FLORIDA, and GEORGIA. Company B, 3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry moved to My Tho by helicopter, while the 3rd Battalions, 47th and 60th Infantry boarded their armored troop carriers and moved south to the Mekong River. During night movement through narrow, uncharted, and shoal-ridden streams, the riverine force came under several ambushes from small arms, automatic weapons, and rocket fire.⁸

While Captain Pagonis' company was moving the artillery barges through a hazardous portion of the narrow Rod Ruong Canal, Dinh Tuong Province, enemy forces opened fire with a barrage from automatic weapons and recoilless rifles. The gunners on the LCMs immediately returned suppressive fire with their .50s. 1LT Terry J. Llewellyn and SSG James L. January meanwhile rallied their men and directed suppressive fire while the convoy moved through the ambush. After receiving word by radio that one of his LCM-8 boats had been hit and was dead in the water, Pagonis immediately turned his command boat around and weaved his way through both friendly and enemy fire to the damaged craft. Calmly issuing instructions to his boat crews, he was able to get the column moving again. During the entire action, he remained exposed to hostile fire as he controlled the operation from his quarter deck, directing his boats' gun crews and personally returning fire upon the insurgent force. Captain Pagonis' aggressive action, coolness under fire, and leadership were deciding factors in the successful movement of the column through the enemy attack. Meanwhile, SP4 Raymond J. Pitre, coxswain, maneuvered his boat and the barge carrying two howitzers into position where they could fire beehive rounds directly at both sides of the river. From his vantage point at the helm, Pitre directed the howitzer fire as well as fired his own .50 into the enemy. PFC James

⁷ CPT William G. Pagonis, "Unit History Annual Supplement," 1097th Transportation Company (Medium boat) 1 March 1968, in Magee, "1097th."

⁸ Lieutenant General John H. Hay, Jr., Chapter VI. Coronado X, *Vietnam Studies, Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1989.
<http://www.army.mil/cmh/books/Vietnam/tactical/chapter6.htm>.

D. Alphin, an amphibious engineer, left the cover of his firing position to direct the last LCM in the column to clear the sandbar after it had run aground. He was credited with saving the craft and the lives of its crew.⁹

After a difficult fight, the two battalions and supporting barge artillery reached the Mekong River and joined up with the afloat base at 0220 hours on 1 February. After a short resupply, the Army and Navy elements steamed for My Tho. Company B, 3-47 Infantry had secured the beach landing sites at My Tho by air assault. The rest of the battalion arrived at 1515 hours and immediately advance north with three companies abreast through the west side of My Tho. Navy monitors and the barge artillery provided automatic weapon and indirect fire. The 3-60 Infantry, beached to the west of 3-47 Infantry, and also attacked to the north where it became involved in fierce street fighting with elements of the 261st, 263rd, and 514th Viet Cong Battalions. LTC Ivan C. Bland moved his companies slowly and effectively, house to house and street by street. Additional artillery, air strikes, and helicopter gunships were called in to support the attacks. By 2100 hours most of the fighting had ceased and the two battalions prepared night defensive positions while the enemy had begun to withdraw. The 3-47 Infantry had killed 58 Viet Cong and captured four, while only losing two of their own. The 3-60 had killed 26 Viet Cong and suffering no one killed. The next morning, the two battalions encircled My Tho while ARVN units cut off the enemy's escape routes. The battalion met only light resistance while they located several enemy soldiers killed in the previous day's fighting. The number of Viet Cong killed by the 2nd Brigade rose to 106. For their heroic action in the battle of My Tho, MG George G. O'Connor, 9th Infantry Division commander awarded ten soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Silver Star Medals on the spot. CPT Pagonis received the Silver Star Medal and 1LT Llewellyn, SSG January, SP4 Pitre and PFC Alphin received the Bronze Star Medals for their actions.¹⁰

During the period 29 January to 7 February 1968, the Mobile Riverine Force made three major relocations. After relieving My Tho, the 2nd Brigade moved to the north to secure Cai Lay, and finally to the southwest to protect the city of Vinh Long. The soldiers of the 2nd Brigade fought through city streets and through the muck and mire of the swamps to break the back of the enemy offensive. The quick response of the riverine force and the well-coordinated fire from Navy rivercraft, barge-mounted artillery, tactical aircraft, and helicopter gunships turned the Tet Offensive into a disastrous defeat for both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Afterwards, the Mobile Riverine Force was back aboard its afloat base awaiting orders for its next deployment in the Mekong Delta.¹¹

During ensuing combat missions the 1097th was usually ambushed once a week. The 1097th Medium Boat earned three Meritorious Unit Commendations, July 1966 to February 1967, September 65 to March 1967, and March 1967 to September 1967. It also received the VDC, TCC and three VCCs.

⁹ CPT William G. Pagonis, Silver Star Medal Narrative and News Release, "Two Ceremonies Honor Transportation Corpsmen," 6 July 1968.

¹⁰ Coronado X, and News Release.

¹¹ Coronado X.

The 9th Infantry Division turned over operations in the Delta to the ARVN and redeployed to Hawaii in 1969 as the first increment of the troop withdrawal. The 2nd Brigade departed on 28 July 1969. On 26 July 1969, the 1097th turned over its LCMs to the ARVN and was inactivated. Those soldiers who had not completed their year in Vietnam transferred to other units. The colors of the 1097th returned to Fort Eustis and the 599th Transportation (Medium Boat) Company was redesignated the 1097th on 5 August 1969.

1097th Medium Boat in Nimrod Dancer/Just Cause

The Vietnam War was not the last time that Army watercraft conducted riverine operations. The 1097th also conducted riverine operations during Nimrod Dancer and Just Cause in Panama. Most of the histories of riverine operations are written from the Navy perspective and rarely mention anything about Army watercraft. This is the Army's story.

Drug indictments against the military leader of Panama, Manuel Noriega, created another US crisis in 1988. Southern Command developed two contingency plans, one for deployment and the other for offensive operations. The deployment plan initially required 96 hours of deployment into country to cover the infiltration of Special Operations Forces (SOF). The offensive plan called for simultaneous strikes at H-hour with the SOF targeting command and control facilities and the Army Forces neutralizing the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). Essentially the SOF would cut the head off of the snake and the rest would kill the body. US Southern Command conducted two deployments in Panama as a response to a coup in 1988 and Noriega's nullification of the presidential elections in May 1989.

After Noriega aborted the results of the national elections of 10 May, President George Bush deployed 2,000 soldiers and Marines on 15 May 1989 for Operation NIMROD DANCER to augment the 193rd Infantry Brigade and Marines already in place. This was a show of force operation with the mission to protect US lives and property and to enforce the rights granted by the Panama Canal Treaty. The 9th Infantry Regiment, 7th ID (L) arrived at Howard Air Base, Panama with two battalions to continue on to Fort Sherman on the Atlantic side of the Canal. The Regimental Commander, COL David Hale, did not want lead battalion to travel by road for fear of any interference from the PDF. He wanted what part of the battalion that could not move by helicopter to move from Howard Air Base to Rodman then by LCMs of the 1097th to Camp Sherman. The process took four days.

On 19 December 1989, US Southern Command executed Operation Just Cause. SOF, helicopters and tanks had infiltrated over two days then the Rangers and a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division parachuted in at H-hour to augment the two brigades already in place. The Third Brigade, 7th ID (L) had replaced the 9th Infantry and became Task Force (TF) Atlantic. TF Atlantic had operational control over ten vessels: two at Fort Sherman, two at Gamboa, five at Gatun Lake and one on the marine railway. Five vessels were at Rodman Naval Base on the Pacific side. At the time, the company was only at 67% strength on personnel.

There were only two C-141 capable airfields in the Panama City area. Since the primary means of deployment into Panama was by air and the US had to have two points of entry. This required the Rangers and 82nd Airborne Division to seize Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport. There were four means for the in-place combat units to assault their targets at H-hour, helicopters, Armored Personnel Carriers, trucks and boats. Many of infantry and MP units drove to their targets. This would be the first time since the Vietnam War that any Army units would conduct an amphibious landing in war.

At 2100 hours, LCM 8508 on the Pacific side picked up 76 paratroopers of the C Company, 3rd Battalion/504th PIR at Sturgis Landing and then LCM 8512 loaded up another 70. The 3/504th PIR was attached to TF Atlantic while attending Jungle Warfare School. Both vessels got underway at 2300 hours and proceeded to Gamboa Prison to conduct an amphibious landing at Gamboa prison in conjunction with an air assault by the rest of the battalion at H-hour (0100 hours), 20 December 1989. LCM 8512 offloaded the mortar platoon at the Gamboa PCC Ramp. Simultaneously, LCM 8508 dropped off a rifle company at the Gamboa prison camp and received small arms fire with no damage or injury to crew. The crew could not return fire because of the paratroopers were in the way. The 3/504th PIR overran the prison while the two boats waited off shore. At 1325 hours, LCM 8508 was cleared to sail to Dock 45 to refuel then return to Sturgis Landing to pick up the ruck sacks and more ammunition for the paratrooper. LCM 8512 stayed in position until 1500 hours when they loaded 67 enemy prisoners of war (EPW). LCM 8508 remained at Gamboa on standby for further missions.

Meanwhile, LCM 8509 was patrolling the Atlantic entrance to the Canal with a Navy SEAL Team on board. The PDF aboard the motor vessel *Asian Senator* anchored at Pier #9 Colon tried to get underway and put out to sea. LCM 8509 blocked the PDF vessel and became engaged in a firefight which resulted in the capture of 14 PDF soldiers along with the detention of 22 civilian crew members of the *Asian Senator*. They were turned over to the MP headquarters at Colon. LCM 8509 only received slight damage. The next day, while on patrol the boat again came under sniper fire. The Navy SEALs returned fire and three PDF soldiers were seen falling into the water.

LCMs of the 1097th Boat Company and LCUs of the 329th Boat Company would continue to ferry cargo, passengers and prisoners of war across the canal in the aftermath of D-Day. Although, Desert Storm would dwarf Just Cause in the size of the operation, many generals would consider Just Cause the beginning of military operations for the 21st century. The cost of the US war machine after Desert Storm reduced its size to where it was no longer feasible to line forces up and push the enemy across the battlefield.

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