

231st Transportation Company (Floating Craft) (USAR)

The 231st Transportation Company was originally activated as the 453rd Transportation Battalion (Harbor Craft and Marine Maintenance) (H/C&MM), in the Organized Reserve Corps at the Coast Guard Buoy Station on the south side of the Bayboro Harbor in St Petersburg, FL on 15 January 1951 and was sponsored by the local Power Squadron. In December 1950, prior to its activation, Comdr Robert Sprague signed a contract with MAJ Edgar McCarthy from the Office of the Chief of Transportation for the St Petersburg Power Squadron to teach seamanship, navigation, and engineering. They were set up more to teach pleasure craft rather than large watercraft. The battalion was organized from personnel of the 329th Transportation Harbor Craft Company at Fort McPherson, Georgia and received a 65-foot T-Boat for training. MAJ Carl R. Green was the battalion commander and 1SG William Raymond Armstrong was the headquarters company first sergeant. Ray Armstrong had risen to master sergeant during WWII.

In 1952, the unit conducted its annual training on Army Freight Ship, FS219, at Camp Leroy Johnson in New Orleans. At that time, the US Army only had seven Freight Ships, two on the Pacific Coast, four on the Atlantic Coast and FS219 on the Gulf Coast. These were 180-foot vessels designed during WWII for inter-coastal transportation. After the war, they carried sham cargo of empty drums and crates to train stevedores in the Organized Reserves on cargo handling. Every year one of the vessels would sail to Petersburg then Pensacola to train the stevedores there. From 1953 on, the unit conducted its two-week annual training at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

On 31 March 1955, the headquarters was redesignated as the 231st Transportation Company (Harbor Craft). As a battalion headquarters, the unit was mostly officers and then head to start recruiting enlisted men and NCOs. It had a T-Boat, a wooden hull J-Boat, and an LCM6 for local training. Detachment Two was formed in the Sarasota-Bradenton area in 1957. The soldiers of the 231st Harbor Craft Company usually conducted their two-week annual training at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

In 1960, 1LT David L. Shreve, Jr, a manager of V. H. Woolum Manufacturing Co., assumed command of the 231st Harbor Craft Company from CPT James L. Beers of Tampa. He had served in the US Navy with Torpedo Squadron 81 aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Princeton*. After the war he graduated from Army ROTC at the University of Florida in 1952 and went straight into the 453rd Battalion. Shreve was promoted to captain in September 1961 while on active duty.

Berlin Crisis

On 13 August 1961, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics blocked the lines of communication extending into Berlin. Consequently, President John F. Kennedy deployed two additional combat divisions to Europe in October. To support this buildup of troops the US Army deployed active duty Transportation units to the ports of debarkation in Northern France and alerted 113 Reserve units for activation. This was the largest call-up of Reserves and National Guard since the Korean War. The 231st

Floating Craft Company was activated to replace the 73rd. It was one of seven Reserve and two National Guard units activated from Florida. The advance party was activated came on active duty on 25 September and the rest of the company was ordered to active duty on 1 October. The 231st had to report to Fort Eustis on 8 October and take over responsibility of the equipment of the 73rd Floating Craft Company, which was sent to La Rochelle, France to participate in the Berlin Buildup. Shreve boasted that he had 54 soldiers with US Coast Guard licenses or qualifications out of the 272 authorized personnel. The company was activated in a Monday morning ceremony, 2 October, in front of the N. Worth Gable Armory at Bayboro Harbor, LTC Edwin D. Selby, commander of the Western Area Command, Florida Sector, and Mayor Herman Goldner congratulated them and the mayor presented the company a plaque as a token of the city's esteem. The company had a few days to get its people and equipment ready for shipment.

The 231st had received T-433; a small 105-ton, one-hatch cargo 65-foot ship used for training prior to being activated. SSG Phil Edwards was part of WO Walter A. Raynor's 13-man crew that set sail that Monday afternoon down around the tip of Florida then up the Intra-coastal Waterway (ICW) to Fort Eustis, Virginia. The rest of the men in the 231st left by trucks on Tuesday or drove their POVs, if authorized, and the remainder flew up on Friday. The J-boat was also hauled up by land transportation.

Phil Edwards had enlisted in the 231st Harbor Craft Company in December 1955, to keep from being drafted. He lived in St Petersburg Beach. Edwards was trained by the Power Squadron in seamanship and navigation. The Power Squadron conducted classroom training in Tampa Bay near St Petersburg. Edwards went all the way through advanced navigations and celestial navigation, so CPT Shreve had to assign SSG Edwards as the navigator to the boats with warrant officers not qualified as navigators. SSG Edwards also had a 100-ton USCG license.

Upon arrival at Fort Eustis, the 231st fell under the 313th Transportation Battalion (Boat), commanded by LTC Howard C. A. Gill. It was a USAR headquarters from Baltimore, Maryland and had a total of five Reserve companies attached to it:

- 205th Transportation Company (Terminal Service)
- 231st Transportation Company (Floating Craft)
- 430th Transportation Company (Terminal Service)
- 464th Transportation Company (Medium Boat)
- 824th Transportation Company (Heavy Boat)

Since the 73rd had already deployed, the 231st crews had to cut the locks off the boats at Third Port to get on them. The company operated LT2088, ST2129, T503, two floating cranes and a fuel barge. The 231st also took over the Freight Ships: FS 313 and the FS 221. The FS *Pvt Carl V. Sheridan* was at Fort Eustis, but not assigned to the 231st. The *Sheridan* may have been assigned to the 313th Trans Bn and manned by personnel from the Baltimore area (possibly the 949th Trans Co Floating Craft). The FS 411 *Shearwater*, FS 209 and the FS 790 were not at Third Port during the Berlin crisis.

The soldiers had to undergo accelerated training to bring it up to proficiency. Then the company conducted coastal and intra-coastal missions. The vessels of the 231st supported WET HORSE II at Fort Miles, Delaware. The 65-foot tugs of the 231st towed four LCM6s at a time lashed stern to stern down to Charleston, South Carolina in the Inland Coastal Waterway (ICW) to pick the LCM8s and towed two back to Fort Eustis. The T-433 and the T-503 also manned by the 231st towed an Army BC Barge from Naval Weapons Station Dahlgren, VA to Hampton Roads Army Terminal; the BC was loaded with an extremely large gun mount purported to be mated with its breech and barrel and to be used to fire instrument packages into near low orbit from a location on the Equator. Another mission was the T-433 towing the T-517 from a shipyard period in Wilmington, NC back to 3rd Port. T Boat missions were mainly resupply up and down the Chesapeake Bay and the ICW, as well as, training exercises at Camp Wallace (Now the Busch Gardens and Kingsmill area) on the James River and Fort Story, Virginia.

From December 1961 through February 1962, the 313th Battalion participated in Exercise SAND DUNES. The companies taking part were the 24th Light Truck, 196th Terminal Service, 231st Floating Craft, 430th Terminal Service, 464th medium Boat, 587th Terminal Service, the 2nd Air Detachment and one amphibious truck company. The exercise consisted of embarkation from Third Port aboard freight ships and landing craft then ferried to Fort Story where the units conducted amphibious assaults, occupation of bivouac areas and Logistics-Over-The-Shore (LOTS) operations. The second week they conducted their ATT in which the units would consist of the units re-embarking the watercraft at Little Creek Naval and conducting beach assaults under different conditions. The 507th Movement Control Group conducted the ATT.

On 17 March 1962, a 44-man Reserve crew sailed FS221 down the Coast around the tip of Florida and up to St Petersburg in a two-week training cruise in time for the St Petersburg Sunshine Festival of States celebration. CPT Shreve skippered the vessel, which docked at Bayboro Harbor for four days and one day at the municipal pier for an open house for the public. This was the first time the freight ship was sailed by an entirely Reserve crew. Mayor Goldner presented CPT Shreve the City of Petersburg flag just prior to it setting sail again. WO Raynor also sailed LT2088, a 100-foot tug, with a 16-man crew to New Orleans on an eight-day voyage. There the tug was attached to the Gulf Coast Transport Terminal Command for two months.

While on active duty, SSG Edwards talked to CPT Shreve about staying on active duty. When on active duty, Phil liked the Army life as an NCO. He had responsibility and by then was pretty well qualified to handle the responsibility. Phil enjoyed the life on the boats. He liked the camaraderie. Boat crews were small close knit groups that lived together and played together. When on the boat they always lived in a clean environment. On the larger vessels they always had hot meals and clean bunk. Most of the Reservists like SSG Edwards brought their families up with them and his family enjoyed the life style at Fort Eustis. CPT Shreve talked him out of it promising he would put Phil in for warrant officer when they returned Florida. Then if Phil wanted to come on active duty, he could as a warrant. He graduated from the Harbor Craft Deck Officer

Course (HCDOC), commonly called "Hotdock," at Fort Eustis and was commissioned as a warrant officer on March 1963. The problem was that he could not go on active duty unless his unit was called up again.

The 73rd TC returned in July 1962. The 231st Floating Craft Company had spent ten and half months on active duty and was released on 13 August 1962. In a ceremony at Murphy Field a number of dignitaries attended to bid farewell to 16 Army Reserve and National Guard. MG Richard J. Meyer, Deputy Chief of Staff of Continental Army Command (CONARC) and BG Rush B. Lincoln, Jr., Chief of Transportation presented CONARC Certificates of Achievement to the senior NCO of each unit. Their activation allowed 40,000 active duty soldiers to deploy to the crisis in Europe which caused CPT Shreve, CPT Benjamin F. Overton (Who went on to become the Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court), 1SG William R. Armstrong were awarded Army Commendation Medals, ten soldiers received a Certificates of Achievement and 57 received letters of commendation. The company and one other were selected out of 16 Reserve units as outstanding units at fort Eustis. The company left in two detachments for their home stations. SSG Raymond Marks sailed T-433 and WO Raynor sailed ST2129, a 65-foot tug, back to St Petersburg. During the return trip to St. Petersburg the T-433 towed two LCM-6 boats and the ST-2129 towed 4 LCM-8 boats for turn in to Charleston Army Depot, SC. They returned via the ICW until forced out to sea by low water in the Lake Okeechobee cross Florida waterway, then sailing thru the Florida Straits around Key West to Bayboro Harbor, St. Petersburg. Upon the company's return, they held another ceremony with the same cast that sent them off, Mayor Goldner and LTC Selby, to honor their return.

After the return to Florida the company was divided into two detachments. Detachment 1 remained at St Petersburg and Detachment 2 was formed at Sarasota.

Cuba Missile Crisis

In September 1962, the Soviet Union shipped nuclear missiles to Cuba. President John F. Kennedy responded by a naval blockade of the island and threat of an invasion. The floating craft battalion out of New Orleans came to Bayboro Harbor for a planned amphibious invasion of Cuba during the Cuba Missile Crisis in October 1962. The 231st Floating Craft became their support unit. Some of the members of the 231st Floating Craft were activated to assist the deployed personnel and take care of vessels. They had to show the new arrivals where to buy food and order parts. They had to billet the crews of the LCMs. The crews of the LCUs and FSs lived aboard the vessels. The crisis was averted and the units redeployed on 10 December 1962.

On 23 June 1966, Detachment 2 was inactivated and the company was reunited at St Petersburg. After six years of command, Shreve turned command of the company over to his XO, 1LT George W. Reilly, and retired in 1965. During the period of 1966-67, the 231st Floating Craft received the Secretary of the Army's Superior Unit Certificate for outstanding training.

Vietnam War

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.

Just prior to that, the 231st Floating Craft was redesignated to a Medium Boat Company with LCM8s. A medium boat would have 19 LCMs crewed by six enlisted men. Since LCMs were skippered by enlisted men, the company had too many warrants, so it kept a floating craft detachment for the warrants. When the 231st Medium Boat Company deployed it would leave the floating craft detachment at St Petersburg. The company was authorized to take a 100% overage in officers when activated and CPT Reilly placed warrant officers in lieutenant positions. The remaining Warrant Officers, NCOs, and enlisted (272 as a Floating Craft unit minus 183 as a Medium Boat unit) were assigned to two Transportation Floating Craft Platoons, the 70th and the 72nd, sharing the T Boat and small tug for operations, training, and maintenance. Each platoon was commanded by a first lieutenant or one of the warrant officers when a lieutenant could not be found. In August 1968 the T 433 was replaced by the FS-756, which was christened USAV *Rendezvous* upon arrival at Bayboro Harbor, St. Petersburg, Florida, the FS-756 was a 156-foot, 2 hatch cargo ship (the same as the H 12 Model displayed by the Marine Training Division, T-School). In about 1972 the USAV *Resource* (EX *Sagitta*, EX *USS Marvin L. Thomas*, a 300-foot Navy AK cargo ship, purported to have been a Naval resupply ship for the ill-fated Early Warning "Texas Towers" installed off the New England Coast during the late 1950s) arrived as a replacement for the FS-756; although the FS-756 remained on station for a considerable time until turn-in. As an aside, all USAR freight ships were named with the letter "R"; for example: USAV *Resolute* (ex Knot Class Ship *Pembino*, sister ship to the USAV *MG William J. Sutton*, EX *Hichory Knoll*, the exception to the "R" motif was named after a Chief of the Army Reserve).

During the deployment of the 231st Transportation Company (Medium Boat) to Vietnam the 70th and 72nd Transportation Platoons (Floating Craft) shared the various watercraft organic assets (ST2129, T-433, FS 756 *Rendezvous*, USAV *Resource*, ST-1993) for training. The ST-1993 replaced the ST-2129 sometime after 1972.

Annual training for the 231st, when not activated for Vietnam, the 70th and 72nd, was mainly held at Fort Eustis. However, other sites such as the Military Ocean Terminal

Kings Bay Georgia; Camp Theodore (Mobile Bay) Alabama; Port St Joe, Florida; and St Petersburg were also venues for annual training.

Since CW2 Edwards had been trying to return to active duty, he told the commander he wanted to be one of the platoon leaders. Reilly originally wanted to leave him back to take charge of the detachment. The commander then called another warrant and asked him if he wanted to be taken off the list and left behind. He said, "Hell, yes." So Phil Edwards became the 2nd Platoon Leader.

The company was activated in May 1968 and sent to Fort Eustis. Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. gave the company enough Florida flags for each boat which they flew on their bows. When the company arrived at Fort Eustis it assigned and trained its crews day and night on operation of LCMs. For the first time the enlisted were running their own boats. Before the warrant officers ran everything. Prior to deployment, CW2 Edwards was put in charge of the advance party. This scared the hell out of him. He did not have any idea of what to do.

On their last day at Fort Eustis, several men missed a mandatory formation. The commander was upset with them and had each one report to him one at a time. The first sergeant disappeared while the captain bore his wrath on the men. The company clerk later asked Armstrong over dinner where he had been. The first sergeant said, "I got out so he couldn't court-martial those guys. He [the commander] doesn't know how to do it." The clerk said that he knew how. The top sergeant acknowledged that was true but the commander did not know the clerk knew how. On another occasion, two fillers who had been transferred from other units missed the last formation. The commander was serious about reporting them AWOL. Armstrong had filled out four days worth of morning reports in advance and asked his clerk where the company rosters, typewriter and supplies were. The clerk replied in his car and that the first sergeant could not write a "buck slip" without him. Armstrong then told him, "get in your car and get the hell out of here." He saved two more soldiers from disciplinary action right before they deployed to war.

In August 1968, Edwards deployed with his first sergeant, 1SG 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 ISG 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 Armstrong 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. 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.

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.

Back to Reserve Duty

Back in Florida, the 231st Medium Boat Company fell under the control of the 143rd Transportation Brigade and later the 32nd Transportation Group when the 143rd became a Transportation Command. It had ten LCM8s and supporting equipment.

At 0600 hours on 10 August 1993, the Tank Barge Ocean 255 and the Tank Barge Bouchard B-155 collided with the outbound phosphate freighter Balsa 37 near the entrance of Tampa Bay. Jet fuel leaked from Ocean 255 then caught fire and burned for approximately 18 hours. Barge B-155, carrying 5 million gallons, ruptured a port tank and spilled an estimated 328,000 gallons of its 5 million gallons of No. 6 fuel oil into the bay. The Coast Guard called upon the 231st Medium Boat to support the cleanup of the worst oil spill in the recent history of Florida. The 231st provided six watercraft and 21 personnel. Two vessels remained on stand-by to transport the strike force and others loaded with various firefighting equipment, trucks, trailers and firefighting foam. The winds and tidal currents carried much of the discharged oil offshore and moved northward, parallel to the adjacent barrier island beaches. By August 14 and 15, a storm system from the west pushed oil onshore back onto several beaches and into and through tidal inlets. For its support, the 231st Medium Boat Company earned the National Defense Transportation Association Military Unit Award in 1994.

The 231st Medium Boat Company moved from St Petersburg to Tampa on 16 January 1998 and was inactivated on 15 June 2000.

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