



Sailors prepare a mine-damaged Assault Support Patrol Boat (ASP) for salvage.



A PBR cruises on the waters of Vung Tag Harbor during 1968.

WHEN BROWN RIVERS RAN RED

OPERATION GAME WARDEN AND THE VIETNAM RIVER WAR — BY KELLY BELL

It was oppressively hot in Saigon during September 1965, and United States Navy Lieutenant Kenneth Logan MacLeod III was careful to not step on or knock down any of the city's diminutive residents as he maneuvered the sidewalk of a nameless street, looking for a shop he had visited the previous week.

The shop looked much like all the others, just a hole in the wall, but he

had to find it — the proprietress was preparing something very important for him. He had gone to her because one of his men who had been in-country several months had told him this seamstress spoke some English, and also did very good work. He had placed his order and the lady told him to return for his purchase in exactly seven days.

As the towering MacLeod ducked under the low doorway and into the

shop's dim interior, the elderly operator emerged from the back room. She had been waiting for him. She carried two colorful bundles over her forearm. After a low bow she held out her handiwork and asked the American, "You like?" When he replied "I like," she flashed a grin of opium-blackened teeth, nodded and commenced wrapping his two big American flags in brown paper. He handed her some *piastas* that neither of

them bothered to count. These flags were the only pieces of equipment he had not been issued upon his arrival in Vietnam, and without them fluttering from his Patrol Boats, River (PBR) he ran the risk of friendly fire. Days later, the banners would see their first combat.

The Mekong River Delta is a vast alluvial plain covering roughly a quarter of South Vietnam's overall land area — if one can call this immense expanse of swamp and endless intersecting streams a land area. It is essentially a riverine inland sea that can be used as a conduit for martial maneuvering and the transport of materials.

During the Vietnam War it was a major battlefield on which the US Navy played its most vital role in this conflict. Control of this watery domain was never really established by either side while hostilities lasted, but both sides fought over and used it in an ongoing bid to make it a resource for victory. In 1965, a well-informed American embassy official remarked, "That's where the Viet Cong have their heart, their greatest strength, control and influence."

When the United States became involved in the endless Southeast Asian

conflict, the Mekong Delta had just one hard-surface thoroughfare. Route 4 connected Saigon and Ca Mau, but most points in between were linked mainly by the river and its spiderweb of streams and canals that eventually empty into the South China Sea. As American involvement in the war expanded, US military strategists compiled the Bucklaw Report, which examined the Navy's coming role in hostilities. The bluejackets would have to switch from blue-water to brown-water tactics in order to wrest at least partial control from Communist forces who depended on the delta as a massive highway for transporting men and supplies. It was a new adventure for the men from Annapolis — they had no knowledge of river warfare, and river patrol boats were in seriously short supply. America's

brown-water sailors would nevertheless acquit themselves very well. The press was quick to take note.

As the autumn of 1965 broke over Southeast Asia, *Arizona Republic* war correspondent Paul Dean reported to his assignment. He was to cover the Navy's riverine warfare units who proudly called themselves "River Rats." He was the type of journalist who believed nothing was too difficult if it meant his news stories were totally informative and totally accurate, so he fearlessly boarded MacLeod's PBR as the October sun sank behind Saigon's skyline.

"Where are we headed?," asked Dean.

"Into the Rung Sat," replied MacLeod.

"Is that the place they call the 'Forest of Assassins?'"



Heavy traffic on waterways, especially near cities like Saigon, made Viet Cong explosive mines a constant threat. US minesweepers patrolled the waters to remove mines. The enemy responded by ambushing US and South Vietnamese forces with rocket-propelled grenades, recoilless rifles, machine guns, and landmines. The Viet Cong even swam up to vessels and attached magnetic mines to their hulls. One such mine caused devastating explosions on USS *Westchester County* (LST-1167) in 1968, killing 25 sailors and soldiers. A minesweeping boat is seen on the Long Tau River during 1966.

Flying an American flag to avoid "friendly fire," PBR sailors check identification papers and search a Vietnamese craft on the Perfume River during 1968.