

DEATH AND DESTRUCTION ON THE DELTA

UNPROVEN AND UNTRIED, THE US NAVY'S FORCE OF RIVER PATROL BOATS WOULD DEVASTATE THE ENEMY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

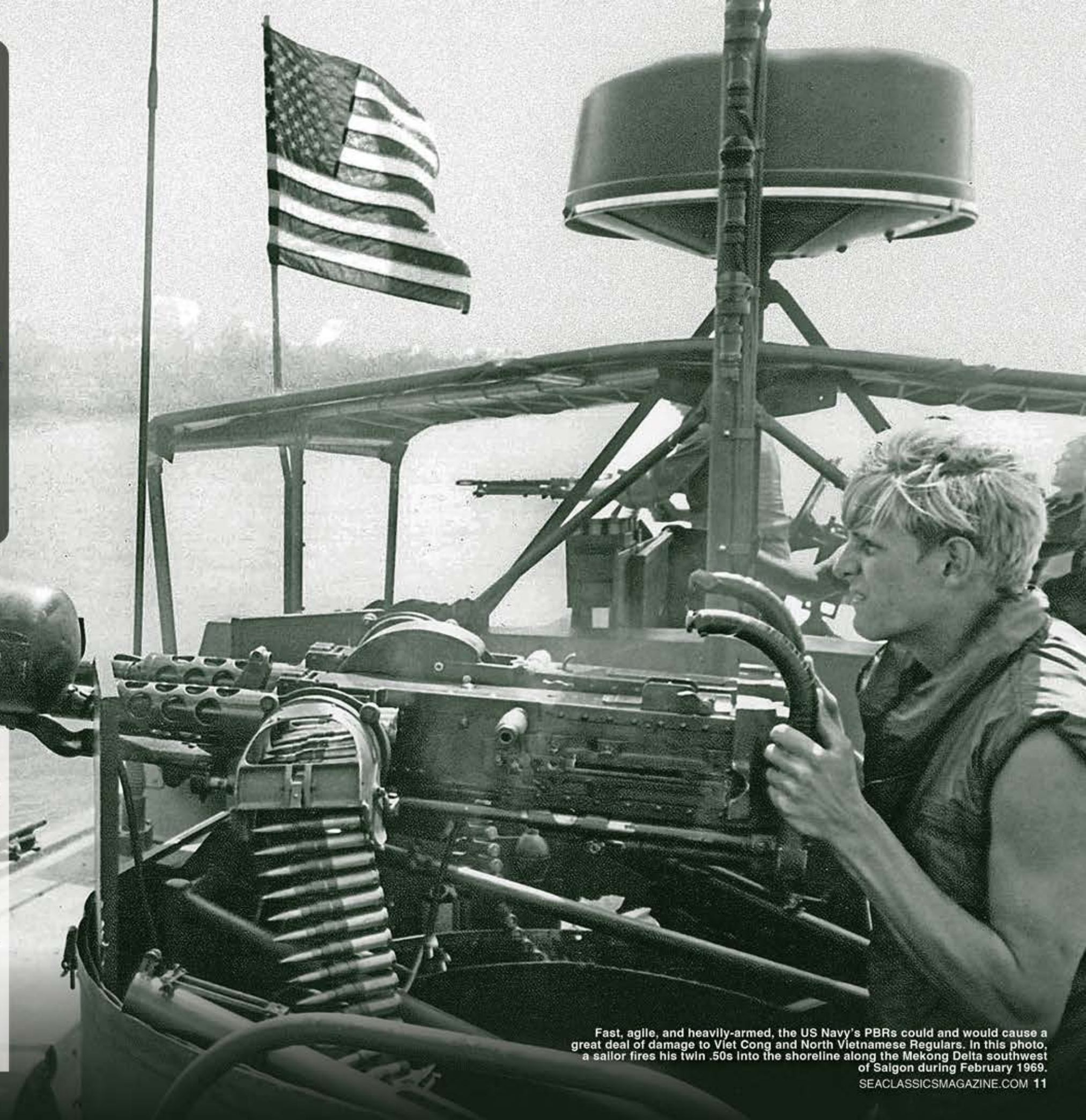
BY KELLY BELL



The United States Navy's involvement in the Vietnam War started early — when North Vietnamese gunboats assailed two of its destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin during 1964. After this engagement, the sailors seemed to row into the background as soldiers on land and pilots in the air commanded the interest of the war correspondents and, hence, the folks back home. Still, the enemy well and ruefully noted America's water-borne warriors, although rarely on the high seas. Except for its aircraft carriers, the Navy's main contribution to the conflict was inland.

The naval high command in Southeast Asia made its Task Force

116 operational just in time for Christmas 1965. Communist forces were exploiting the sprawling, cobweb-shaped Mekong Delta to float supplies and soldiers to the combat zones. The endless streams bisecting the swampy Rung Sat region between the ocean and Saigon was the main patrol area for the US fleet of state-of-the-art fiberglass speedboats. Bristling with 20mm cannons, flamethrowers, 81mm mortars and rows of .50-caliber machine guns, these miniature warships commenced hunting throughout the thousands of brown-water channels that previously had been a dependable supply pipeline for the enemy.



Fast, agile, and heavily-armed, the US Navy's PBRs could and would cause a great deal of damage to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regulars. In this photo, a sailor fires his twin .50s into the shoreline along the Mekong Delta southwest of Saigon during February 1969. SEACLASSICSMAGAZINE.COM 11