
MILITARY

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Vietnamese Navy (VNN) River Patrol Force / RVNAF Amphibious Task Force

The great strategic and economic importance of South Vietnam's extensive inland waterways made it clear from the beginning of the war that the Navy would be in the front rank of the allied forces. Laced by 3,000 nautical miles of rivers, canals, and smaller streams, the fertile Mekong Delta south of Saigon, where the largest segment of South Vietnam's population lived, constituted the country's rice bowl. Northward along the coast to the DMZ, sizable rivers stretched inland past vital population centers such as the old imperial capital of Hue. Throughout the country the road and rail system was rudimentary while the waterways provided ready access to the most important resources. The side that controlled the rivers and canals controlled the heart of South Vietnam.

As the Vietnamese Navy's primary combat arm, the River Force was charged with operating with the army to defeat the enemy in the vital Mekong Delta. Recognizing the importance of this mission, the Naval Advisory Group worked to procure new and replacement craft. The River Force received hundreds of craft from 1965 to mid-1968, including specially configured LCM 6 and LCM 8 landing craft that served as monitors, command boats, troop transports, minesweeping boats, patrol vessels, and fuel barges. The United States also provided the river sailors with 27 American-built river patrol craft (RPC). Unfortunately, these vessels proved to be too noisy, underarmed, and easily slowed by river vegetation.

The acquisition of all the new craft enabled the Vietnamese Navy to create another seven river assault groups. However, six of the newer groups (28-33) operated with eight fewer craft than the normal complement of 19 river craft. The 27th RAG, a special formation, deployed 22 boats. Formed by the Vietnamese Navy in June 1968, River Patrol Group 51, contained the first eight PBRs turned over by the U.S. Navy and assigned duty on the Long Tau and Dong Nai rivers. The following month, the 32d RAG redeployed to Thua Thien north

of Hue where it incorporated a six-boat detachment based there since May 1967. The other components of the River Force, the River Transport Group, until dissolved in March 1966, and the 28-boat River Transport Escort Group, added to the mobility and firepower of the command.

The PBR, the ubiquitous workhorse of the River Patrol Force, was manned by a crew of four bluejackets, equipped with a Pathfinder surface radar and two radios, and commonly armed with two twin-mounted .50-caliber machine guns forward, M-60 machine guns (or a grenade launcher) port and starboard amidship, and a .50-caliber aft. The initial version of the boat, the Mark I, performed well in river patrol operations but was plagued with continual fouling of its water-jet engines by weeds and other detritus. In addition, when Vietnamese sampans came alongside for inspection they often damaged the fragile fiberglass hull of the PBRs. New Mark IIs, first deployed to the delta in December 1966, brought improved Jacuzzi jet pumps, which reduced fouling and increased speed from 25 to 29 knots, and more durable aluminum gunwales.

As far back as March 1968, MACV had been urging the Vietnamese to form a force similar to the US Mobile Riverine Force (for a detailed discussion of the US MRF, see 1968 MACV Command History, Vol 1, pp 242-243). At that time COMUSMACV had forwarded a recommendation to the CJGS for the formation of a Vietnamese Riverine Warfare Group composed of VNN and VNMC elements. During the ensuing six months, there had been numerous exchanges of letters and several conferences between MACV and JGS on the subject. The JGS agreed in the need for such a force, but had wanted to defer its formation until the VNN's River Assault Forces could be modernized. In September 1968, COMUSMACV recommended to the CJGS that an Amphibious Task Force be established without waiting for the turnover of USN craft. At about the same time, the Phase II RVNAF force structure had been finalized. The rationale, at that time, had recognized that the Mekong Delta would remain the center of insurgency and would require amphibious/riverine forces for surveillance and control.

To meet this requirement, the RVNAF-approved force structure included sufficient VNN ships and river assault craft to lift a total of nine VNMC battalions. It was envisioned that the combination of VNN and VNMC units operating from strategically located bases in the Delta and formed into an integrated amphibious team would provide a significant force capable of countering insurgency throughout the region. In late October 1968, the JGS had directed the formation of an amphibious task force (ATF) composed of one VNMC battalion and two VNN RAGS to be activated 1 Dec 68. The ATF had been reluctantly activated as scheduled but only operated for one week before operations were suspended because of poor coordination between JGS and ARVN commanders. This problem had been the subject of a mid-December JGS conference, but no solution was reached.

In March 1969, the JGS prepared a draft SOP for the new formation of an ATF (TF 211) to be composed of six new RAIDS and three VNMC battalions. Soon thereafter, the VNN prepared a somewhat different SOP for the assimilation of the same six RAIDS into the Navy. According to the JGS proposal the primary mission of the ATF would be to conduct riverine operations. It would be utilized as an element of the general reserve, with OPCON to the CTZ commanders of the CNO, VNN depending on the type of operations. It would be employed as a "joint" entity with only JGS having the authority to separate it into VNN and VNMC elements. Also, the CTZ commanders could request OPCON of the ATF or an ATG from JGS.

According to the VNN proposal, the ATF would be composed of only the six VNN RAIDS with infantry elements attached, as necessary and required for operations. The primary mission would be to control water LOCs. It would be used as an organic unit of the VNN under the VNN CNO, who would determine the AOs, or under the OPCON of the CTZ commander, upon request, for limited operations.

In the final analysis, MACV favored and recommended employment of the JGS proposal for the following reasons: 1. It was a more versatile and effective force and would be preferred for any type of riverine operation. 2. The JGS proposal made better use of the specialized training and capabilities of both the VNN and VNMC. Separate employment of these forces could only be authorized by JGS. 3. The joint ATF better replaced the US MRF than would a solely naval force. 4. The ATF, as an integrated force of the General Reserve, could react faster than a force that would have to be organized for each operation. The ATF, under the JGS proposal would have the following command and control relationships: 1. The CNO, VNN and the CG, VNMC would be responsible for their components of the ATF and would have command, less OPCON, of their elements. Since the ATF would be an element of the General Reserve, the JGS would have OPCON. For an interdiction mission, the JCS could pass OPCON of a task group to the CNO. 2. For large operations, where the entire force would be required, the JGS could pass OPCON to a CTZ commander. 3. If only one of the task groups would be required for an operation, the JGS could pass OPCON of one task group to a CTZ commander who

could then pass it to DTA commander if conditions warranted. The other two task groups of the ATF would remain under the OPCON of the JGS.

The JGS proposal did not address the question of a specific commander for the ATF or any of the task groups, but, in accordance with the MACV doctrine for riverine operations, if the mission of the ATF or any of the groups were to deny the use of a waterway system or to maintain control of riverine LOCs, the overall commander should be a naval officer. If the mission, however, was to establish or maintain control of riverine LOCs and contiguous land areas, or to locate and destroy enemy forces, supplies and equipment, the overall commander should be a ground commander. The JGS proposal, which MACV concurred in and highly recommended an early execution date for, was a positive JGS response to a MAC V proposal for the attainment of the Phase II force structure goals in the improvement of the RVNAF.

By the end of 1970, when the South Vietnamese navy took over the River Patrol Force, there were almost 300 PBRs in use. By December 1970, COMNAVFORV had transferred to Vietnam the remaining river combatant craft in his command, which included 293 PBRs and 224 riverine assault craft.