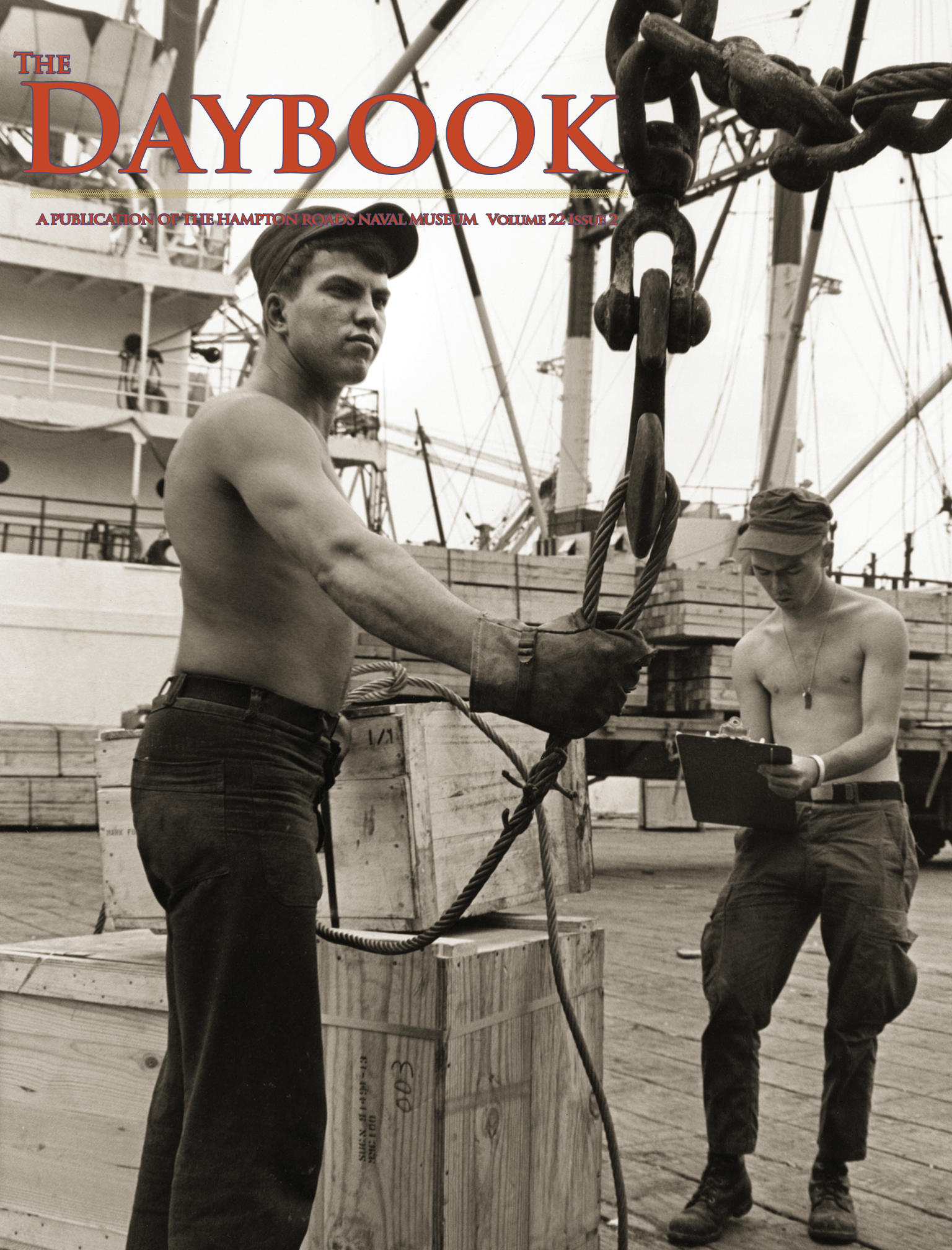


THE DAYBOOK

A PUBLICATION OF THE HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM VOLUME 22 ISSUE 2



HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM STAFF

DIRECTOR

John Pentangelo

DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Joseph Judge

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Laura Orr

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Elijah Palmer

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Max Lonzanida

EDITOR

Clayton Farrington

EXHIBITS SPECIALIST

Don Darcy

REGISTRAR

Katherine Renfrew

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Darcy Nelson Sink

CEREMONIES COORDINATOR

Tom Dandes

LIBRARIAN/ADMIN OFFICER

Angelique Payne

EDUCATION

Zachary Smyers
Matthew Headrick
A. J. Orlikoff
Alicia Pullen

PRESIDENT, HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Ed Kellam

COVER: Seaman John Dahlgren unloads shroud lines from crates while Seaman Phillip Rasnake records their arrival at a port in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). While revolutionary new types of containerized transport were making their debut during the Vietnam War, most cargo was transferred the old-fashioned way once it arrived in-country. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

THE DAYBOOK

The Daybook® is a registered trademark of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum (HRNM), Department of the Navy, an agency of the United States Government. It is an authorized publication of HRNM, ISSN 2380-4181. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official view of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, or the U.S. Marine Corps and do not imply endorsement thereof. Book reviews are solely the opinion of the reviewer.



The HRNM reports to the Naval History and Heritage Command, Museums Operation Division (www.history.navy.mil). The museum is dedicated to the study of naval history in the Hampton Roads region. HRNM is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.



The Daybook's purpose is to educate and inform readers on historical topics and museum-related events. It is written by staff and volunteers.

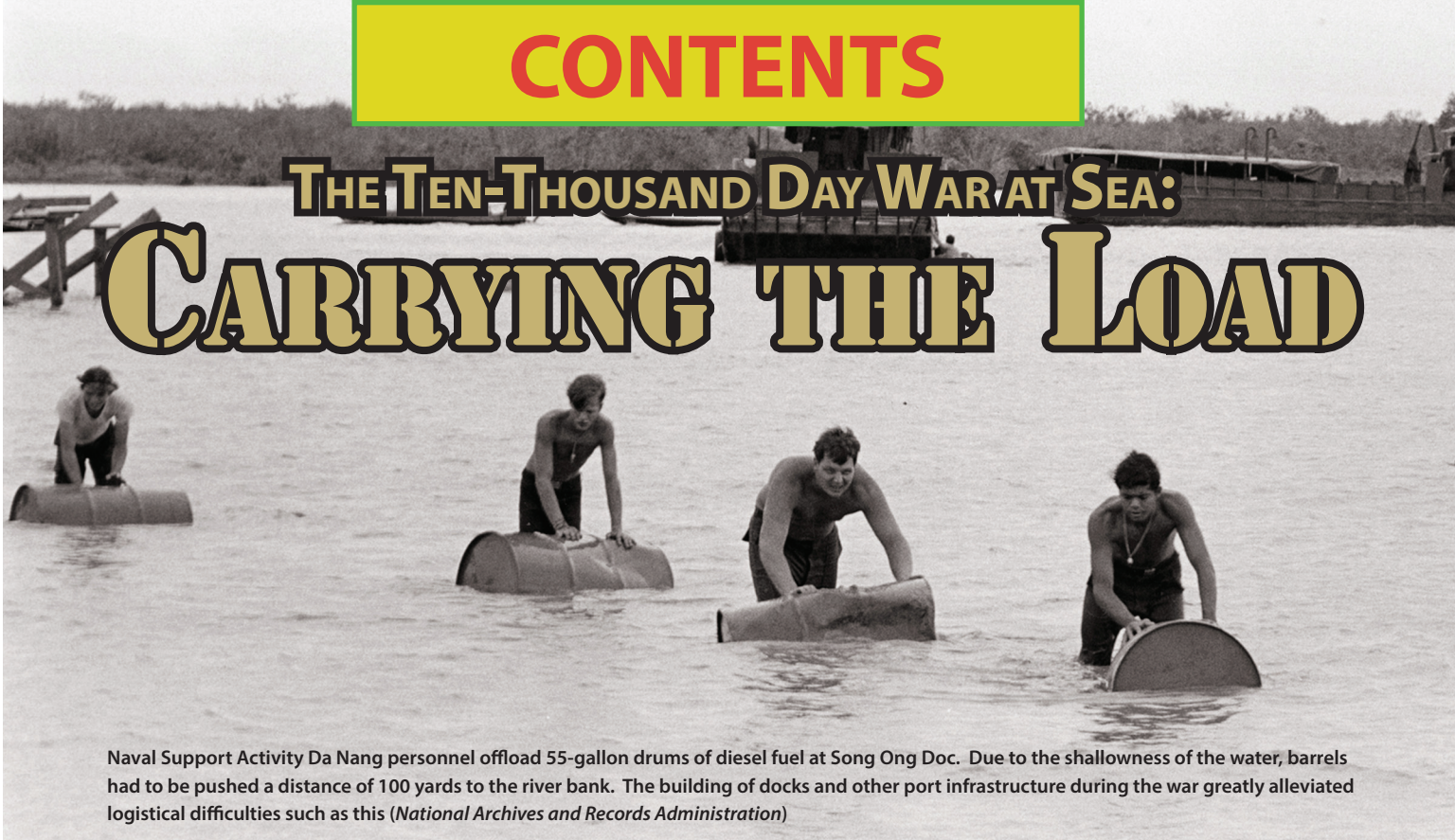
Direct questions or comments to the Editor at (757) 322-3107, Fax (757) 445-1867, E-mail hnavalmuseum@navy.mil or write *The Daybook*, Hampton Roads Naval Museum, One Waterside Drive, Suite 248, Norfolk, Virginia 23510-1607. The museum is on the World Wide Web at www.hrnnavy.mil.

The Daybook is published quarterly. To subscribe, contact the Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation at (757) 445-9932 or visit <http://www.hrnhf.org>.



CONTENTS

THE TEN-THOUSAND DAY WAR AT SEA: CARRYING THE LOAD



Naval Support Activity Da Nang personnel offload 55-gallon drums of diesel fuel at Song Ong Doc. Due to the shallowness of the water, barrels had to be pushed a distance of 100 yards to the river bank. The building of docks and other port infrastructure during the war greatly alleviated logistical difficulties such as this (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

FEATURES

- 3** **THE FOURTH ARM OF DEFENSE: THE US MERCHANT MARINE AND EARLY SEALIFT OPERATIONS**
- 5** **MOVING A NATION: OPERATION PASSAGE TO FREEDOM**
- 7** **SEALIFTING THE OFFENSIVE**
- 12** **MERCHANT MARINERS UNDER FIRE**
- 15** **FROM THE REAR, WITH THE GEAR**
- 21** **RAMPING UP & DRAWING DOWN**
- 23** **CONCLUSION**

DEPARTMENTS

- 2** **FROM THE DIRECTOR**
- 18** **HRNM VIETNAM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, PART IV:
THROUGH A SAILOR'S EYES: "THAT'S WHAT WE CARRIED"**

"We Hauled Everything"

The Hampton Roads Naval Museum is proud to announce the upcoming exhibition *The Ten Thousand-Day War at Sea: The U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Comprising half of our permanent gallery, the exhibition will immerse visitors in the immense role played by the United States Navy in the Vietnam War. Using the U.S. Navy's rich historical collections, multi-media presentations, and interactive components, the exhibit will encourage family learning, thoughtful discourse, and recognition of the war's naval activities.

The current issue, focusing on logistics and support, is the final edition of five *Daybook* issues concentrating on the Navy in Vietnam. The featured articles are edited treatments of the recently published nine-volume series: *The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War*. We thank the Naval History and Heritage Command and the Naval Historical Foundation for their permission and assistance.

The U.S. Navy was the backbone of the logistics effort in Vietnam. The United States transported 99% of ammunition and 95% of supplies (including vehicles) by sea. By mid-1967, the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) ran a fleet of 527 ships to keep the ammunition and equipment moving. The MSTS also transported tens of thousands of U.S. and allied troops to South Vietnam. The Seabees (Navy Construction Battalions) built, repaired, and maintained base and port facilities, hangars, helicopter pads, runways, piers, and offshore fuel lines. The Navy established Headquarters Support Activity, Saigon on July 1, 1962. Naval Support Activity, Da Nang later served as the Navy's largest overseas logistics command. Naval personnel provided spiritual and physical support as well. Navy doctors and nurses treated the wounded on hospital ships and in-country while chaplains and corpsmen served with Marines fighting on the front lines. The pages within cover some of these often-overlooked aspects of warfare.

This issue also includes excerpts from the museum's oral history interview with Vietnam veteran and Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation board member Ray



HRNM Director John Pentangelo.

Weber. Weber, an YFU (Harbor Utility Craft) engineman, operated on the rivers in I Corps from 1968 to 1969. In this excerpt, it becomes clear that Weber and his fellow Sailors indeed carried "anything [the Navy] needed to fight a war." We wish to thank all of our Vietnam veterans who served in the United States Navy. If you or someone you know wants to participate in the Vietnam oral history program, please call 757-322-3108 for more information.

I am proud to announce that the exhibit opens on October 9, 2019. Please visit us soon!



THE FOURTH ARM OF DEFENSE

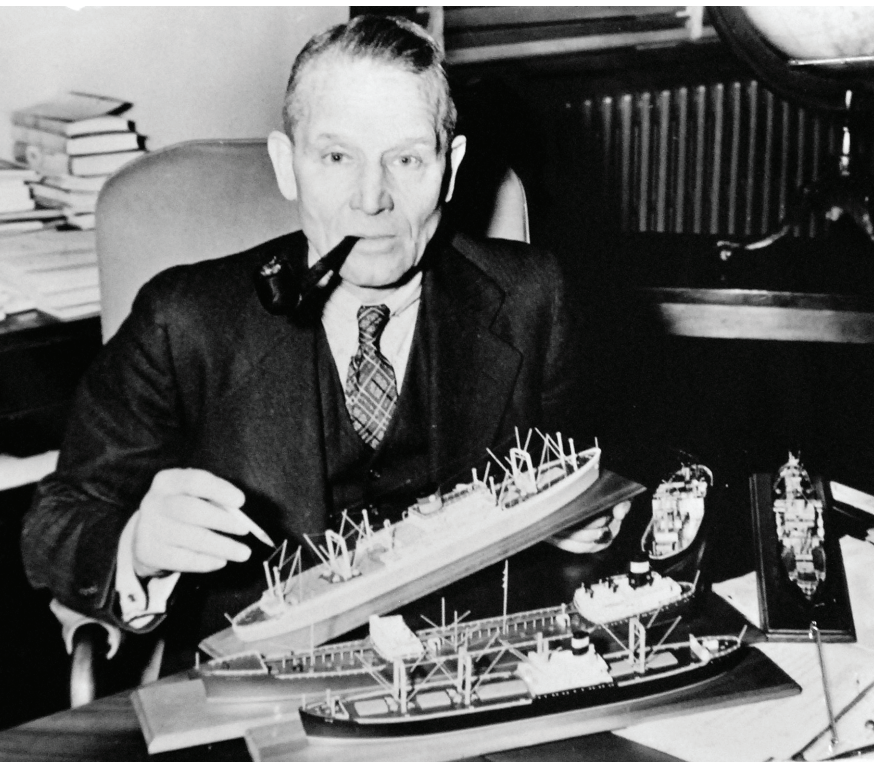
THE U.S. MERCHANT MARINE AND EARLY SEALIFT OPERATIONS

By Salvatore Mercogliano

While lacking the drama of the combat operations, the oceangoing logistics effort mounted by the U.S. Navy and America's merchant marine from 1965 to 1973 was nothing short of monumental. The MSTC (renamed the Military Sealift Command in 1970) enabled the United States to fight and sustain an eight-year conflict on the continent of Asia, 7,000 miles from American shores. The U.S. Merchant Marine and its civilian crewmembers transported 99 percent of the ammunition and fuel and 95 percent of the supplies, vehicles, and construction materials employed by allied forces in the war. With dozens of ships steaming between the United States and South Vietnam on any given day of the war, a virtual "steel bridge" spanned the vast Pacific Ocean.

World War I marked the first great building program for overseas logistical support of deployed U.S. military forces. This War Bond Poster from the era reads, "On The Job For Victory / United States Shipping Board / Emergency Fleet Corporation." (*Pennsylvania Cement Company Collection. Library of Congress, Lot-8083-3*)

During the Philippine-American War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War, the merchant marine transported American armies to Asia and Europe and kept those forces well-armed, equipped, and provisioned. The Merchant Marine Act of 1936, championed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, stipulated that it was "necessary for the national defense and development of its foreign and domestic commerce that the United States shall have a merchant marine." The legislation further provided for a merchant marine "capable of serving as a naval and military auxiliary in time of war or national emergency." The merchant marine especially proved its worth in World War II during which President Roosevelt referred to the organization and its mariners and sailors as the nation's "Fourth Arm of Defense." Vice Admiral Emory S. Land simultaneously oversaw the U.S. Maritime



Pointing at models of ships which make up America's rapidly-growing Victory Fleet, Admiral Emory S. Land takes over his new job of administering U.S. shipping to insure the most efficient use of all American vessels in the war effort. As chairman of the Maritime Commission, Admiral Land helped build the "bridge of ships" which supplies the United Nations with U.S. war production. (*Office of War Information Photograph, February 1942 via Library of Congress*)

Commission, the U.S. Maritime Service, and the War Shipping Administration. Those organizations spurred a building program that produced 5,777 merchant ships that then transported 63 percent of all the world's goods. After World War II and during the early Cold War, there was much less demand for a sizeable merchant fleet. At the same time, automation and mechanization enabled the fleet to operate fewer but more efficient ships with smaller crews and hence lower operating costs.

Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson authorized establishment of the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) on October 1, 1949. As outlined in its initiating directive, the organization's purpose was "to provide, under one authority, control, operation and administration of ocean transportation for personnel, material, mail, and other cargo." Through this directive, American leaders hoped to end interservice bickering between the Navy and Army, the latter of which had long operated its own


vessels. In 1950 the Army transferred its 115 ships and 17,000 merchant mariners and civilian staff members to MSTS.

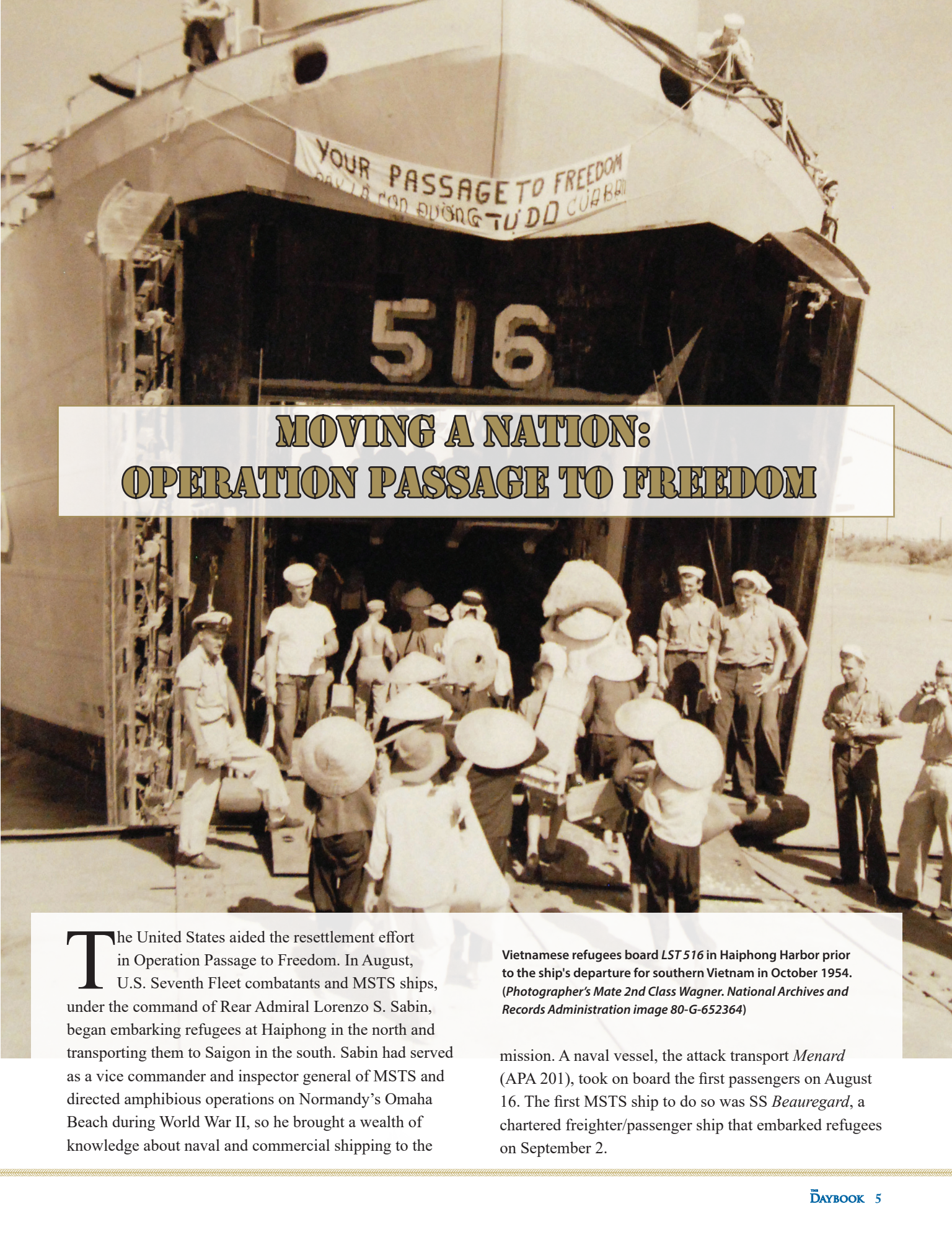
During the Korean War, MSTS grew to a fleet of close to 500 ships (including 214 under charter), which transported 4,750,363 troops, 51,769,067 tons of cargo, and 21,354,978 long tons of petroleum to the combat theater. MSTS also supported the movement to Europe of four U.S. Army divisions in support of the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization, established in 1949. During the period 75 percent of the MSTS operating budget went to the commercial maritime industry.

MSTS ships delivered supplies during the early 1950s to another locale that figured prominently in the next decade—Vietnam. In San Francisco on June 25, 1950—the first day of the Korean War—SS *Steel Rover* loaded

armored vehicles, trucks, jeeps, and ammunition as part of the \$2.6 billion U.S. Mutual Defense Assistance Program. The material was not intended for the South Korean armed forces but for the French forces fighting Communist Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh movement in Indochina.

Ho Chi Minh's ally in the fight against France was the People's Republic of China, also hostile to the United States. Hence, it was no surprise when Chinese guns opened up on *Steel Rover* when she passed along the Chinese coast south of Hong Kong on August 6. One round hit the ship's starboard side but caused only minimal damage. Escorted by a Royal Navy ship the following day, *Steel Rover* continued her journey and reached Saigon without further incident. Many more U.S. vessels, including 13 ships contracted with the Waterman Steamship Company of Mobile, Alabama, supplied the French throughout the war.

Despite U.S. assistance, the Viet Minh defeated their French opponents, most notably at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. The resulting Geneva Agreement of July 1954 provided for French withdrawal from Indochina and the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The agreement also allowed Vietnamese north of the dividing line, an area governed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, to settle in the south, which was controlled by a non-Communist government. 



MOVING A NATION: OPERATION PASSAGE TO FREEDOM

The United States aided the resettlement effort in Operation Passage to Freedom. In August, U.S. Seventh Fleet combatants and MSTs ships, under the command of Rear Admiral Lorenzo S. Sabin, began embarking refugees at Haiphong in the north and transporting them to Saigon in the south. Sabin had served as a vice commander and inspector general of MSTs and directed amphibious operations on Normandy's Omaha Beach during World War II, so he brought a wealth of knowledge about naval and commercial shipping to the

Vietnamese refugees board LST 516 in Haiphong Harbor prior to the ship's departure for southern Vietnam in October 1954. (Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Wagner. National Archives and Records Administration image 80-G-652364)

mission. A naval vessel, the attack transport *Menard* (APA 201), took on board the first passengers on August 16. The first MSTs ship to do so was SS *Beauregard*, a chartered freighter/passenger ship that embarked refugees on September 2.

SS *Columbia Victory* and SS *American Hawk* unloading at Da Nang, South Vietnam on October 26, 1966. (Photographer's Mate 1st Class J.L. Dyer/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)



The exodus generally proceeded uneventfully during the next few months, but neither Haiphong nor Saigon possessed adequate cargo facilities or pier space. USNS *Pembina* (T-AK 200), for instance, arrived in Haiphong to load 2,000 tons of cargo, taking 13 days to do so.

USNS *Marine Adder* (T-AP 193), one of six MSTs troop transports to take part in the operation, loaded her first refugees on September 13. During succeeding months the ship made six round trips. Her crew delivered 14 babies while at sea and served the passengers over 82,000 pounds of rice. The ship also gained recognition when she transported the 100,000th Vietnamese refugee to Saigon. Finally, on May 18, 1955, *Marine Adder* became the last U.S. vessel to depart Haiphong in Operation Passage to Freedom. In 1957 the government of the Republic of Vietnam awarded the Presidential Unit Citation to nine nucleus fleet vessels and seven chartered ships, including *Marine Adder* and *Beauregard*. The oceangoing operation transported 293,002 Vietnamese civilians and 14,868 soldiers, 2,978 French military personnel, 8,135 vehicles, and 68,757 tons of cargo.

MSTS streamlined its operations after the First Indochina War. Headquartered in the Old Navy Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., Commander MSTs oversaw four regional area commands: Eastern Atlantic/Mediterranean, Atlantic, Pacific, and Far East (based in Yokohama, Japan). The latter command was responsible for supporting the war effort in Vietnam. MSTs also incorporated two former subordinate entities, the Naval Transportation Service and the Petroleum and Tankers Branch. The first organization comprised auxiliaries, amphibious ships, transports, attack cargo ships, and oilers manned by naval personnel, and provided

logistics support to Navy bases in the Pacific. By the mid-1960s MSTs had decommissioned all but three transports and replaced them with similar ship types with civilian crews.

Several factors led to a decline in MSTs's ability to support a major military commitment in Southeast Asia during the early 1960s. An agreement signed earlier in the Cold War between Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson and Secretary of Commerce Charles Sinclair Weeks (the Wilson-Weeks Agreement) stipulated that commercial interests would be allocated approximately 50 percent of the overseas shipping business in support of the military. Cost-cutting measures also halved the size of the merchant fleet by late 1964. MSTs then operated 201 cargo ships, tankers, and troop transports.

America's merchant marine was in somewhat better shape by 1965, operating 965 ships with a combined carrying capacity of 14.7 million deadweight tons. In addition, the World War II building program had produced 1,512 vessels (14.4 million deadweight tons) anchored and in reserve at eight locations around the nation. On the negative side, many of these ships built during that war were obsolete by 1965. The commercial fleet possessed some unique attributes, such as standardized C-class freighters that could handle certain oversized cargo on deck and employ their own equipment to off-load cargo at undeveloped ports. Before Vietnam, the United States also constructed 55 tankers, including the 106,500-ton SS *Manhattan* that dwarfed standard 16,500-ton T-2 tankers.

Hence, MSTs and the merchant marine had both strengths and weaknesses as the United States prepared to deploy major combat forces to Southeast Asia on the eve of the Vietnam War.





SEALIFTING THE OFFENSIVE

Soldiers of 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, cheer their arrival at Cam Ranh in July 1965 on board the troop transport *General LeRoy Eltinge* (T-AP 154). (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

In the early months of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson decided, based on the advice of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and other key civilian and military advisors, to mount major military operations against North Vietnam and Communist forces in South Vietnam and Laos. In March, aircraft based on Seventh Fleet carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin and Air Force planes in South Vietnam and Thailand launched the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Also in March, Seventh Fleet landed a Marine expeditionary brigade in northern South Vietnam to protect the air base at Da Nang from any Communist retaliation for the U.S. air strikes. That same month, the U.S. Navy deployed ships and patrol planes along South Vietnam's 1,200-mile coast to interdict the seaborne infiltration of arms and other munitions from North Vietnam.

In April President Johnson allowed the Marines ashore to transition from their defensive mission to offensive operations against the Viet Cong in the region around Danang. Two months later the President approved plans to deploy the equivalent of several U.S. Army infantry divisions to sites in South Vietnam, and by 1968 U.S. forces ashore totaled 549,000. Washington also moved ahead with plans to strengthen the military and economic infrastructure of South Vietnam and the existing counterinsurgency campaign against the Viet Cong. These actions would require an oceanic troop movement and logistics effort on the scale of World War II.

Directing the overall Vietnam logistics support effort from his headquarters in Washington, D.C. was Vice Admiral Glynn "Donc" Donaho, Commander MSTS. Managing the voyages to and from Vietnam in 1965 was



The French-built headquarters building of MSTs Vietnam on the Saigon waterfront. (Courtesy of Ray Weber)

his subordinate, Captain James L. Hunnicutt, Commander MSTs Far East. Headquartered in Yokohama, Japan, Hunnicutt directed the staff work of 23 officers, 45 enlisted sailors, 105 civil servants, and 223 Japanese civilians. Subordinate offices operated at Sasebo and Okinawa, Japan; Taipei, Taiwan; and Inchon and Pusan, South Korea. He later set up offices in Guam, Subic Bay, and Thailand. To carry out his functions, Hunnicutt directed a fleet of three C-1 freighters, a heavy-lift C-4 cargo ship, two coastal cargo ships, five T-1 tankers, and 17 tank landing ships (LSTs).

One of Hunnicutt's first priorities was to establish an MSTs presence in Vietnam, so in early 1965 he dispatched Lieutenant Commander G. J. Kaiser (relieved in November 1965 by Captain Donald J. Jacques) and another officer to Saigon. The pair initially operated from a small room at Naval Support Activity Saigon. Eventually, the MSTs office in Saigon, with more than 100 staff members, took over an entire floor of a former French shipping firm on Trinh Minh Street. The office also dispatched several five- to seven-man teams to ports around the country to monitor the arrival, off-loading, and departure of MSTs ships.

The first major combat formation transported to Vietnam after the Marine landing at Da Nang was the Army's Okinawa-based 173rd Airborne Brigade. Air Force transports moved most of the troops by air to the base at Bien Hoa, northeast of Saigon. The Navy was called on to bring in the unit's artillery, antitank guns,

engineering equipment, and headquarters staff. USNS *General William A. Mann* (T-AP 112), one of three Navy-manned troopships under MSTs operational control, and three MSTs tank landing ships arrived at Vung Tau, southeast of Saigon, after a five-day voyage from Okinawa. Soon thereafter, they delivered their cargo to the South Vietnamese capital.

The transportation of American forces by sea had been standard throughout U.S. history, so it was not unusual that in 1965 the United States deployed more than half of its expeditionary force to Vietnam on troop transports. MSTs then operated 16 troopships, all of which were run solely by civilian mariners. One of the ships, USNS *General Nelson M. Walker* (T-AP 125), was a veteran of Magic Carpet, the operation to return troops to the United States after World War II and the Korean War. During the latter conflict, she sailed more than 35,000 miles in three months and loaded over 18,000 passengers at 15 different ports. A typical voyage from San Francisco to Vietnam in 1965 for *General Nelson M. Walker* took 18 to 21 days. A civilian crew of 233 and a military contingent of 18 men operated the 608-foot ship, which could transport 2,746 troops and 454 cabin passengers at a speed of 19 knots.

The passage to Vietnam posed a challenge. The supply line stretched 7,000 miles across the Pacific Ocean from the West Coast of the United States. A ship sailing from San Francisco to Saigon proceeded not westward but northwestward on the Great Circle Route due to the curvature of the earth. Each vessel first sailed along the Aleutian Chain into the North Pacific—one of the most dangerous bodies of water during the winter months—then southwest, paralleling Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula and the coast of Japan. Merchantmen then had to contend with typhoons, common during the summer months, along the coasts of China and the Philippines. The final leg of the journey brought the ships into the South China Sea, notorious for its shoals and other "dangerous grounds." For those ships traveling to Saigon, a 45-mile segment remained, including the Long Tau River that passed through the Rung Sat Swamp (the Vietnamese called it the "Forest of Assassins") teeming with Viet Cong guerrillas.

The trans-Pacific experience was unique for those Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines who made the voyage to Vietnam on a troopship. As the ship reached tropical waters, the heat below often became unbearable, compelling many passengers to sleep on the weather deck or in lifeboats. For some, this was their first time on the ocean and seasickness typically hit them very early in the voyage, taxing the ship's medical departments.

The prolonged transit gave commanders an opportunity to orient the men to their units and prepare them for the mission ahead. The long voyage also afforded the men an occasion to reflect on how they would deal with combat in an alien land. One soldier, Jerry Baker, often sought solitude on *General Nelson M. Walker*'s stern. He remembered that "at night there was nothing nearer than the dark with a zillion stars." He added, "You'd hear a 'swrrrr' sound going through the water [from the ship's two propellers]. [The stern] was one of those places you could get away to and be by yourself. This was the perfect spot."

The voyages enabled the Soldiers and Marines to ease their transition from peace to war. For those men who survived death or injury during their tours of 12 or 13 months in country, which actually began when they boarded the initial transport to Vietnam, the trip home afforded them time to prepare for the return to civilian life. On both legs of the journey, the men could take advantage of movies, recreational activities, and long hours of conversation with comrades.

Another veteran of the trans-Pacific operation was USNS *General LeRoy Eltinge* (T-AP 154), a freighter converted into a troopship during World War II and then put in reserve. Hastily recalled to service, on May 13, 1965, she set sail from San Francisco to Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, loaded with the Army's 35th Engineer Group, which would construct port facilities. The aged troopship, however, broke down 450 miles west of Midway Atoll. USNS *Furman* (T-AK 280) soon rendezvoused with *General LeRoy Eltinge* and towed the immobilized ship to the atoll for repair work. MSTC dispatched USNS *Barrett* (T-AP 196) to the site where she embarked the Army engineers and completed the journey to Vietnam, reaching the destination nine days later than



USNS *General Nelson M. Walker* (T-AP 125) preparing to disembark troops at Vung Tao Anchorage, Vietnam, April 16, 1967. In the left background a floating crane is offloading LCU landing craft and other items from a cargo ship. (Photographer's Mate 1st Class J.T. Luscan/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)

General LeRoy Eltinge's scheduled arrival. During the same period, *General W. H. Gordon* (T-AP 117) and three freighters loaded 2nd Brigade, the 1st Infantry Division's equipment and transported it and the troops to Qui Nhon. Once again seaworthy, in July *General LeRoy Eltinge* embarked the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in California. Although configured to carry a maximum of 3,650 troops, the 3,600 soldiers on board complained about the crowded conditions. The soldiers were clearly not enamored with their troopship. One of the paratroopers described the vessel as "five hundred and ten feet of rusting gray steel." Nonetheless, *General LeRoy Eltinge* completed her mission and delivered the combat unit to Vietnam. She and her sister ship, USNS *General R. M. Blatchford* (T-AP 153), remained in service until January 1967.

President Johnson's announcement on July 28, 1965, that he was ordering the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to Vietnam occurred at the same time that he decided to

significantly reinforce the ground forces already there. During the next several months, the ten MSTs troopships in the Pacific transported the 1st Infantry Division, the Republic of Korea (ROK) Capital “Tiger” Infantry Division, and the ROK Marine Infantry “Blue Dragon” Brigade to Vietnam. By the end of 1965, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) had three Army infantry divisions and a brigade, the 3rd Marine Division, one regiment of the 1st Marine Division (transported by Seventh Fleet amphibious ships), and one Korean division and a brigade on hand. MSTs delivered 82,800 troops to Vietnam in 1965 and the Air Force airlifted another 85,100, nearly an even split between sea and air transportation.

Vice Admiral Donaho marshaled his resources to accomplish the deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to Vietnam. The operation demonstrated MSTs’s ability to accommodate not only the troops but also the equipment for an entire combat division in one operation. Not since the demise of Operation Gyroscope—the rotation of Army divisions to Europe in 1958—had MSTs attempted to move such a large force overseas. To handle the transportation of the airmobile division, comprising 15,000 soldiers, 452 Bell UH-1 “Huey” helicopters, and 98,000 tons of equipment, Admiral Donaho deployed six Atlantic fleet troop transports to Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. To maintain the flow of troops to Europe, MSTs chartered berths on board the superliner SS *United States* and other commercial ships and airliners. On August 16, 1965, USNS *General Simon B. Buckner* (T-AP 123) departed Charleston with the 2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division embarked. USNS *General William O. Darby* (T AP 127), USNS *General Maurice Rose* (T-AP 126), USNS *General Alexander M. Patch* (T-AP 122), USNS *Upshur* (T AP 198), and USNS *Geiger* (T-AP 197) soon followed.

General Alexander M. Patch and *Upshur* were the first ships to arrive at Qui Nhon with elements of the division’s headquarters staff. As other troopships arrived at the port, they anchored in the roadstead since no oceangoing berths existed there at the time. Landing craft completed the movement of the troops ashore. Afterward, ten freighters arrived carrying trucks and equipment.

Among the MSTs fleet at Qui Nhon were three ships especially suited to the movement of the Army’s wheeled vehicles. Developed during the late 1950s, roll-on/roll-off ships enabled vehicles to be driven on and off the vessels quickly via side and stern ramps. USNS *Comet* (T-LSV 7), USNS *Taurus* (T-LSV 8), and SS *Transglobe* participated in the 1st Cavalry Division move. Subsequently, they established a service among Okinawa, Cam Ranh, and Saigon, later adding Qui Nhon, Danang, and Bangkok, Thailand, to their routes.

Another trio of ships loaded the division’s helicopters at Mobile, Alabama, and Jacksonville, members freed the aircraft from their “Spraylot” (shrink-wrapped) coverings and readied them for flight. Landing craft then ferried aircrews out to the ship, who then flew the aircraft to the 1st Cavalry Division’s base at An Khe in central South Vietnam.

The next period of the Vietnam buildup, which lasted from April 1966 to January 1967, consisted of the MSTs deployment of the 4th Infantry Division, 9th Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, and the ROK 9th “White Horse” Infantry Division. Seventh Fleet deployed the remaining two regiments of the 1st Marine Division. In Phase II, MSTs transported 91,000 troops in organized units to Vietnam and airlift-delivered 371,000 men as individual replacements—one out of every five troops traveled by sea.

The 3,124-man 196th Light Infantry Brigade, initially intended for a crisis in the Dominican Republic, boarded *General William O. Darby* and USNS *General Alexander M. Patch* (T-AP 122), under John LeCato, in Boston, Massachusetts, on July 15, 1966. The ships then set sail for Vietnam. After traversing the Panama Canal and stopping briefly at Long Beach, California, the ships delivered their passengers to Vung Tau on August 11. The 12,358-mile journey then marked the longest troop transit in MSTs history.

In mid-1966 General Westmoreland requested three *Victory*-class ships based in Subic Bay, Philippines—USNS *Phoenix* (T-AG 172), USNS *Provo* (T-AG 173), and USNS *Cheyenne* (T-AG 174)—to deploy the 11th Armored Cavalry “Blackhorse” Regiment, to defend road convoys. The ships had been loaded with combat equipment years before as a readiness measure championed by Secretary of Defense McNamara. He wanted cargo and fuel ships forward deployed near



trouble spots. The Vietnam War preempted plans to deploy nineteen floating forward depot (FFD) ships. The overwhelming need for resources in Vietnam ended the experiment. The concept of Army afloat prepositioning would benefit from this experiment in the future, however, when the Army revived the concept in 1994—ships deployed at Diego Garcia loaded out the equipment of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, then being demobilized in Germany.

With the completion of Phases I and II, MSTs placed four P-2 transports in reduced operation at Caven Point, New York, and three P-2 and two C-4 transports at Hunter's Point, California. A skeleton crew of 50 merchant mariners at each site kept the ships ready for activation in 90 to 120 days for potential use in another sealift operation.

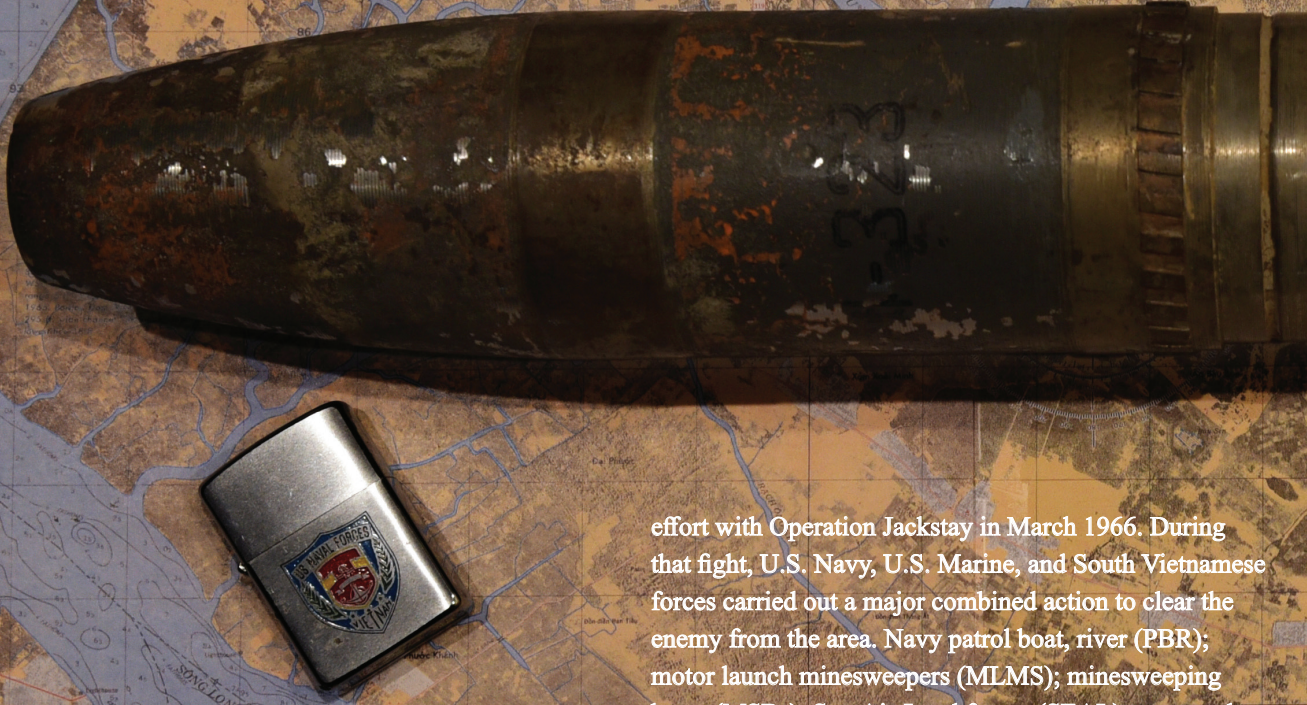
During Phase III, which ended in June 1968, seven MSTs transports deployed additional units to Vietnam,

Soldiers of the Army's 11th Light Infantry Brigade stand at attention at a ceremony at Qui Nhon, marking their deployment to South Vietnam by MSTs troopships in December 1967. (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

including the Royal Thai Army Volunteer "Queen's Cobra" Regiment, two U.S. Army divisions, and two U.S. Marine Corps regiments. With this mission completed, by 1970 MSTs deactivated the ships at Cavin and Hunter's Points. During the last years of the war, only Barrett and Upshur remained in the troop transport business; the pair deployed elements of the Thai "Black Panther" Division to Saigon and rotated Korean troops between Vietnam and South Korea. After the war, these vessels and sister ship *Geiger* were employed in the training of thousands of merchant mariners at the New York, Maine, and Massachusetts maritime academies.



MERCHANT MARINERS UNDER FIRE



After braving the dangers of the sea, many merchant mariners and their ships had to fight to survive the hostile environment of Vietnam. One of the most perilous legs of the journey from the United States to Saigon was the last 45 miles. Viet Cong forces armed with command-detonated mines, recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms lined both sides of the Long Tau, a shallow, serpentine river between Vung Tau on the South China Sea and Saigon, South Vietnam's largest city. Bordering the river was the Rung Sat Swamp, a lightly populated bog of dense foliage, meandering waterways, and mud. The Rung Sat concealed many Viet Cong guerrillas. Throughout the war the enemy made a concerted effort to cut the Long Tau, an accomplishment that would have isolated the capital of South Vietnam and frustrated allied military objectives throughout the Mekong Delta. The Viet Cong never achieved that goal, but allied merchant mariners and fighting men paid a price to deny the enemy that victory.

From the earliest days of the Republic of Vietnam, the River Force of the Vietnam Navy (VNN) had fought to secure the Rung Sat. The United States continued that

effort with Operation Jackstay in March 1966. During that fight, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine, and South Vietnamese forces carried out a major combined action to clear the enemy from the area. Navy patrol boat, river (PBR); motor launch minesweepers (MLMS); minesweeping boats (MSBs); Sea-Air-Land forces (SEAL) commandos; and helicopters deployed for the action. In the end the allied forces killed or captured 69 enemy troops and destroyed Viet Cong supply sites, but the enemy was far from beaten.

To counter the efforts of the VC in the Rung Sat, the allies deployed forces to keep the Long Tau River open. On May 20, 1966, the Navy established Mine Squadron 11, Detachment Alpha (later renamed Mine Division 112). The unit's twelve 57-foot fiberglass-hulled MSBs, along with VNN minesweeping motor launches, continuously swept the river to ensure the safety of the merchant ships. Patrols were conducted early in the morning from Nha Be using paravanes and chain drag sweeps to sever electrical wires that connected mines in the river with Viet Cong guerrillas ashore ready to trigger them.

Heavy Viet Cong activity against U.S. merchant ships and river patrol forces on the Long Tau occurred during the period from December 1965 to February 1967. During that period the enemy made 18 attempts against allied vessels. One such assault took place on August 23, 1966, when SS *Baton Rouge Victory* with a cargo of 8,250 tons of vehicles, electronic equipment, general supplies, and post-exchange goods hit a moored mine that ripped

The Viet Cong fired Chinese-made high-explosive 75mm recoilless rifle rounds such as the one shown here at merchant vessels transiting the main channel to Saigon. This round was captured in the Rung Sat Special Zone. The US Naval Forces Vietnam Zippo lighter, monogrammed to be presented by Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, is shown for scale. (NHHC 1967-373-E/ Seabee Museum 2009.255.13180)

a 35-by-45-foot hole in the port side, ruptured the port boiler, and disabled the main propulsion and primary steering controls. The detonation and superheated steam escaping from the boiler killed seven crewmen.

Fearing that his vessel would sink and block the main shipping channel to Saigon, Captain Konrad Carlson immediately coned the ship toward the shore and beached her on the south bank of the river. Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV), suspended ship traffic on the river and quickly dispatched U.S. and South Vietnamese combat units to the scene. The mining of *Baton Rouge Victory* proved to be the only time during the war that the enemy managed to interrupt the logistics lifeline to Saigon for a full day. American and Vietnamese sailors paid a high price to keep the shipping lane open. In August 1966, attackers sank a Vietnam Navy motor launch minesweeper, killing or wounding five Vietnamese sailors and wounding two American naval advisers. Guerrillas sank another MLMS in January 1967. On February 15, 1967, ambushers struck *MSB-49* with 75mm recoilless-rifle and automatic-weapons fire that wounded all six crew members and devastated the boat. That same day, the enemy sank *MSB-45*, killing two American Sailors and wounding another 16.

Six merchant ships sustained direct attacks during 1967. However, 1968 proved to be an even more harrowing time for the merchant mariners on the Saigon run. The enemy launched 44 assaults that year. The VC

launched 51 assaults in the first half of 1969, but by the end of the year the allies had won the battle for the Rung Sat. The victory resulted from a campaign kicked off in June, the goal of which was to destroy a VC sapper battalion, the enemy's primary fighting force operating on the Long Tau. The sappers operated from the Nhon Trach District of Bien Hoa Province north of the Rung Sat. A force of U.S. and South Vietnamese riverine combatants; attack helicopters; and U.S., Australian, and Thai infantry units swept through Nhon Trach and part of the Rung Sat. The operation resulted in the destruction of four enemy base camps and the death or capture of 53 guerrillas.

Afterward, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces kept applying pressure on the enemy guerrillas, frustrating their efforts to regroup. Army bulldozers and aerial-sprayed herbicides denuded much of the Rung Sat's foliage. The enemy did not launch a single attack on the merchant ships transiting the Long Tau well into 1970. Lieutenant Robert W. Champion, the commanding officer of Mine Division 112, reported later that after more than 2,000 operations by his minesweepers, the only enemy gear they recovered were 17 lengths of wire and not a single mine. On November 1, 1970, the VC carried out an attack on the American President Lines' SS *President Coolidge*, but the next attack did not occur until a year later when the enemy struck Sea-Land's *Raphael Semmes*.




In Da Nang Harbor, Mineman 2nd Class Franklin Marshall, a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team member, conducts a search for mines, especially those attached to ship's hulls, circa April 1966. The EOD Team is responsible for harbor security. Several merchant ships are in the distance. (Photographed by Ernie Filtz/ National Archives and Records Administration photograph)

During 1966 and 1967 the U.S. Navy employed significant resources to protect South Vietnam's major ports and the merchant ships docked there. COMNAVFORV deployed Inshore Undersea Warfare Units (IUWU) 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 at Vung Tau, Cam Ranh, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Vung Ro, respectively. In Operation Stable Door, these units operated landing craft, personnel, large; Boston Whalers; and 45-foot picket boats that constantly patrolled the harbors. EOD divers routinely searched harbor waters and the hulls of anchored or docked merchant ships for mines. Each IUWU established a harbor entrance control post manned by Sailors and equipped with surface search radars and radios that enabled quick reaction to any suspicious activities in port. Despite the ability to sink or damage a few ships, during the period from 1965 to 1968, the enemy never appreciably slowed the delivery of troops, ammunition, fuel, and other supplies.

During the early 1970s the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies increased attacks on shipping in South Vietnam's ports. This campaign to destabilize the allied war effort registered more success than in previous years because the withdrawal of U.S. Navy port security and harbor defense resources taxed the capability of the VNN. On occasion the South Vietnamese defenders stymied enemy attacks on merchant ships.

Enemy sappers, however, had greater success in the period from March 1970 to May 1972 when they sank seven ships at Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh, and Da Nang, the major ports supplying central and northern South Vietnam.

The allies suffered damage to their merchant ships and the death or wounding of seamen. Over the course of the war, the enemy attacked 138 merchantmen on the Long Tau, but the merchant mariners succeeded in their effort to keep the fighting forces armed, fueled, and supplied. 

FROM THE REAR, WITH THE GEAR: MOVING CARGO ONTO AND ALONG THE SHORE

The U.S. logistics support establishment had to not only transport military materiel to Vietnam but also move it ashore. Even as MSTs gathered and deployed its maritime assets for the buildup, other commands evaluated Vietnam's capacity to handle the massive influx of soldiers, tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, construction materials, ammunition, fuel, and other essential war-making supplies. They were distressed with what they found; few places on earth were as unprepared as Vietnam in 1965 to accommodate such a monumental influx. Da Nang, Qui Nhon, and Cam Ranh boasted excellent natural harbors on the South China Sea, and Saigon, while far inland, had been a major port since French colonial times. The port facilities at these sites, however, were minimal or nonexistent. Saigon boasted 10 berths—only three of which handled military cargo—for oceangoing ships and Cam Ranh had two, but Vietnam had no other deep-water berths. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Paris Clark, on the MACV J-4 (logistics) staff, summarized the situation. He observed that “ten first-class ports in the continental United States were shipping materiel to South Vietnam as fast as they could, but MACV only had four second-class ports to receive it.”

Few warehouses or outdoor storage sites existed at any port to accommodate a massive influx of equipment and supplies. Since South Vietnam's railroads had been largely destroyed by the fighting and its roads were rudimentary or under enemy control, much of the

materiel shipped to the major ports had to be reloaded onto coastal vessels for delivery to smaller ports. Too few of the efficient U.S. utility landing craft (LCUs) reached Vietnam in 1965. A lack of requisite material-handling equipment—trucks, forklifts, pallet-jacks,



and handcarts—slowed the movement of cargo off the docks. Vietnamese port authorities had to employ an army of unskilled stevedores to off-load incoming cargo. Few watercraft were available to lighter or transport materiel from ships anchored in the harbor to the shoreside facilities. Finally, cultural, linguistic, and other differences between South Vietnamese and U.S. logistics authorities complicated delivery. The ports soon became hopelessly clogged with cargo waiting for movement inland and ships stood idle because they could not be unloaded. The situation was so chaotic that by November 1965, 122 fully loaded ships waited at anchor off Saigon and at holding areas throughout Southeast Asia, Japan, and Guam.

The U.S. Army's 1st Logistics Command, established in April 1965, began a robust construction program to expand and improve South Vietnam's port facilities. Lending support to that effort were MSTS, Service Force Pacific Fleet, Naval Support Activity Saigon, and Naval Support Activity Da Nang. The objective of this enormous project was to build additional piers for oceangoing ships at Saigon, Da Nang, Cam Ranh, and Qui Nhon and berths at the minor ports of Can Tho/Vung Tau, Chu Lai, Phan Rang/Nha Trang, and Vung Ro. Eventually, there would be 32 deep-draft piers in South Vietnam. When the minor ports were ready to receive ships, MSTS Office Vietnam posted 5 to 8-man teams at each to coordinate cargo deliveries.

In August 1966 even as the piers were being built at the various ports, the Army Corps of Engineers brought in large dredges to clear 65 million cubic feet of mud from South Vietnam's harbors, large navigable rivers, and ship channels. The dredges accomplished their mission, but not without cost. Viet Cong sappers killed three civilian crewmen and sank *Jamaica Bay* on January 9, 1967 and, in later years of the war, the VC sank the dredges *Thu Bon I*, *Sandpumper*, *Davidson*, and *New Jersey*.

One of the hallmarks of U.S. maritime and naval history has been the country's ability to introduce and adopt new technologies such as clipper ships, steam propulsion, and steel hulls. During the Vietnam War vessels capable of over-the-beach supply, tugs and barges, and cargo containers made significant contributions to the logistics effort.

American LSTs first made their mark in World War II, not only on D-Day but throughout World War II and the Korean War.



USS *Stone County* (LST 1141) unloads ammunition stores on a beach near Da nang, Republic of Vietnam, on July 25, 1966, with another LST unloading to the right. (*Journalist 1st Class Ernest L. Fitz/ Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

American naval leaders understood in 1965 that, with Vietnam's ports unable to handle a massive movement of incoming supplies, only vessels capable of "logistics over-the-shore" operations could ease the burden. The LST was ideally suited for that mission. Each 4,000-ton, 327-foot ship could load and discharge cargo, including tracked and wheeled vehicles, through cavernous bow doors directly onto the beach or onto quickly built concrete ramps. MSTS employed some of its LSTs to load supplies at Saigon, Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh, and Da Nang and to distribute those materials at smaller ports along the

coast and into the larger rivers of South Vietnam. Other ships transported materiel from Subic Bay and Japan by way of Okinawa.

These ships were unique in one respect: Japanese and Korean nationals crewed them. Right after World War II, the United States occupation authorities in Tokyo and Seoul employed Japanese and Korean mariners aboard LSTs to repatriate hundreds of thousands of former Imperial Japanese Army soldiers. The ships and their non-American crews continued to serve U.S. interests during the Korean War and remained in operation right up to the Vietnam War. Eventually, 42 LSTs supported MSTs as did the Navy's Landing Ship Squadron 2 with five ships crewed by American Sailors. The Republic of Korea, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Thailand operated a total of six LSTs as part of the multinational effort to preserve the independence of South Vietnam.

Complementing the work of the LSTs were tugs and barges that MSTs chartered for Vietnam service. The Alaska Barge and Transport Company (AB&T), headquartered in Vancouver, Washington, proved to be one of the stars of the logistics effort. Beginning in December 1965, AB&T convoyed 17 World War II-era Miki-class tug boats and 38 barges across the Pacific. These units began their work in March 1966 and served throughout the war. During the war AB&T lost 11 tugs and barges to enemy action and natural events. Despite the danger, the men of this firm provided vital logistical support throughout the war.


The use of cargo containers proved to be one of the most innovative, efficient, and timely means of providing logistics support to America's armed forces in Vietnam. Historians credit Malcolm McLean, a former truck driver and owner of the seventh largest trucking company in the United States during the 1950s, with designing the modern shipping container. He believed that a container could be loaded with cargo at a point of origin, sealed, transported by truck or rail to a port, lifted whole onto a ship for the ocean transit, and then lifted off the ship at a point of delivery. At no time during the transportation process would stevedores have to handle the cargo inside the container. In 1956 SS *Ideal X* sailed from Newark, New Jersey, to Houston, Texas, with fifty-eight 35-foot trailers stacked on an elevated weather deck, the first test of this revolutionary concept.

While McLean met with initial opposition, in May 1966 MSTs contracted three Sea-Land "containerships"



In July 1968, Sealand trailer trucks line up to receive one of 609 vans carried by the transport vessel, each of which can carry 20 tons of cargo. (*Journalist 1st Class Joseph D. Sheets/ Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

to transport 476 containers between Oakland, California, and Okinawa every 12 days. The success of that operation prompted MSTs to put out bids for container service to Vietnam. McLean's firm won the contract in part because he promised to provide ships, containers, trucks, chassis, and relevant terminal services.

Between 1967 and 1969 the number of containers delivered to Vietnam every month by Sea-Land ships rose from 456 to 2,688. From 1967 to 1973 Sea-Land earned close to \$450 million, most of the profits resulting from its Vietnam service. Admiral Ramage related that the Sea-Land ships transported three times the cargo normally carried by conventional freighters, and by the end of the war were delivering 10 percent of all the cargo to reach Vietnam. This was a truly impressive performance. 



Through a Sailor's eyes: "THAT'S WHAT WE CARRIED"

Under Fire at the Tip of the Brown Water Logistics Chain

By Laura Orr

As part of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum's Vietnam commemoration, staff members have conducted oral history interviews with Navy veterans who served in Vietnam. In this issue of The Daybook, HRNM staff would like to share portions of an interview conducted in April 2017 with Ray Weber, who deployed to Vietnam from June 1968 to July 1969. Weber served mostly in I Corps, aboard a YFU (Harbor Utility Craft), which was a slow-moving boat that delivered supplies and personnel in Vietnam. In this excerpt from the interview, Weber discusses what his YFU did, along with some of his observations and experiences.

Question: Tell me a little bit about the YFU and what you did.

Answer: Those boats [YFUs] were from World War II. They were landing craft that had landed in places like Normandy. They had been laid up and brought back to navigate the rivers in Vietnam. They had a four-foot draft. We could go up a river in four to five feet of water, even fully loaded with 135 tons of cargo on board. So that's why we were slow targets. Initially, when I got there, we would convoy up the rivers. But what would happen is—the Viet Cong had these wires stretched across the river and they would put a mine on them. If you went to the starboard side of the channel or the port side they would pull that mine on that wire underneath you, wait until your fuel tanks were over it—you carried about 750 to 1,000 gallons of fuel—and then they would touch those off. They would sink the first boat and the last boat in the

convoy. And then everybody in between was trapped, with nothing but jungle on the sides. They would cut you to pieces from the jungle. And there was no place to go. You couldn't even turn those boats around. Other than during the monsoon season, the channels were very narrow. Especially when you were loaded, you just couldn't get out of the channel.

The Navy decided we had to change our strategy. So when we went up north by the rivers, we began anchoring in the delta. Then, at first light, they would take LCM 6s, "6 boats." They had what they would call "cutter bars" that they would drag behind them. The 6 boats were very light, and they would go down the sides of the channels with the cutter bars, cutting the wires that the Viet Cong were using to pull the mines across. We would fall in behind them and go upriver once they cut the mines. Then, the main thing that we worried about was the RPGs

Marine passengers aboard a Navy Landing Craft, Utility (LCU) sightsee and relax as they proceed along the Hue River to Hue, Vietnam. An observation plane maintains vigil overhead. (*Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

that they would shoot from the jungles. They would shoot through into our boat's well deck, especially if we were carrying ammunition or something. We lost a lot of boats in '68 on the river from our squadron, because you were pretty much a sitting duck.

In I Corps, where my boat operated, we had a lot of Marines. And you had to keep them fed, you had to keep them in fuel, you had to keep them in ammunition. Everything they needed came by river, especially during the monsoons when everything was so wet they couldn't do anything by ground. They really depended on us to get them what they needed to fight with.

So we hauled everything. We hauled beer, whiskey, ammunition, nitroglycerine for the Seabees when they were trying to build roads and so forth up north and clear areas, clear perimeters and so forth. It made me nervous when we carried nitroglycerine. But we carried all of those things—anything they needed to fight a war. That's what we carried. So you felt pretty good that you were doing something good.

Question: Did you operate mostly during the day or at night?

Answer: We'd operate 24 hours a day. We never shut down. I'm serious about that. We never shut down. When we were near the ramp, waiting to backload, sometimes it took a long time to get to us. Because of that, we would throw concussion grenades all night. And it was hard to sleep. Most of the time we didn't sleep in the racks; we slept up on deck, because those grenades—when they went off, the sound would hit the side of the boat and, oh my god, it would hurt your ears. So we stayed topside. We were always worried about swimmers coming in to blow the boat up. Very few ramps had concertina barbed wire that they would pull across to keep the swimmers out of the ramp areas, so we worried all the time.

Question: Can you tell us a little bit more about your experiences dealing with the Viet Cong during your trips



Engineman 2nd Class Ray Weber in Vietnam. (Courtesy of Ray Weber)

upriver? Feel free to share a specific story, if you have one.

Answer: Yeah, I can tell you about one very specific situation. When I wasn't manning the gun tub when we going upriver, I would man the radio. When you passed a certain point you had to call in and let HQ communications know where you were on the river so when you got hit they would look at where you called your last checkpoint. Then they could send PBRs, helicopters, gunships, or, if we were hit real bad, then they would call the aircraft carrier and they would launch Phantoms, F-4s, who would come and napalm. I'd been there quite a while when this one incident happened—probably nine months at least. So you get kind of immune to everything. You're there all the time. You're 20, 21 years old, so you think you're bulletproof anyway, okay? And I was sitting and I was calling in our checkpoints as we were going upriver. Beautiful day. And all of a sudden I heard a "thunk" – I mean a real "thunk." And then I heard another one. The bosun looked down, and he said "Get the hell off of there! Hide!" What was happening was, a sniper was shooting at me. And he must have been way out, because we were going through farmland—he must have been way out in one of the ditches or something like that. He was just shooting

a little low. And he ruined all of the life jackets that were in the box I was sitting on. He was hitting only about two feet below where I was sitting. That's the closest I think I came. If that sucker was a little better shot, I wouldn't be talking to you today.

There was another situation that happened in Da Nang when we were unloading once. We went up the river and then we were in the waiting station—us and the number 1614 boat were in waiting stations. They had brought LSTs in, and LSTs were on a ramp. They were unloading the LSTs. They were stacking all of the supplies—most of it was ammunition—on the ramp to be loaded onto our boats so we could take it up north. . . . We were really moving a tremendous amount of material during the Tet Offensive. I'm not sure how it happened, but the Vietnamese blew up all of that material that they had been stacking, waiting to backload it to us. I mean it was just a tremendous amount. It was probably at least a half a dozen RTs—forklifts—and it just backed up. And I remember, I mean it just. . . you could have read a newspaper a mile down the river in the well deck because of the light from the explosion. It was just. . . everything was blowing up.

I've got a picture of one of our boats that blew up that night. It blew the ramp of that boat over 400 yards. There wasn't anybody left alive on that boat. It just obliterated it. There was all kinds of stuff floating in the water after that. Thank gosh 14 boat and our boat were still in waiting



The bow of YFU 78 after an enemy rocket attack at the Da Nang Bridge Ramp on February 27, 1969, which killed seven crewmen and wounded three aboard the transport, while another Sailor was killed and three more wounded aboard LCU 1500 nearby. (Courtesy of Ray Weber)

station, so we were down the river waiting to be called in to backload. That was a nasty night. That was really a bad night.

Those are some the things that I remember very vividly because they imprint in your head. And I remember on our boat that night there was one of the guys from the 78 Boat, which was totally blown up and everybody killed. He was on our boat playing poker with us. When we left, we went back down the Tien Shaw ramp, backloaded, and went upriver. He was still on our boat. He didn't have any place else to go. He stayed on our boat. He went upriver with us and we stayed upriver for a long time shuttling things back and forth on the rivers. The Navy people, they didn't know he was with us until we reported that he was there—it was just luck that he wasn't aboard his own boat that night. Total luck. 🚢

Laura Orr is director of education for the Hampton Roads Naval Museum



Engineman 2nd Class Ray Weber and a fellow Sailor stand upon stacks of field artillery rounds they are delivering aboard their harbor utility craft. (Courtesy of Ray Weber)

The 10,000-Day War at Sea CARRYING THE LOAD

RAMPING UP & DRAWING DOWN

USS *Sacramento* (AOE 1) transfers fuel oil via highline while other supplies (such as aircraft drop tanks) are transferred via CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter to USS *Hancock* (CVA 19) in the South China Sea in April 1966. (Chief Journalist Jim Falk/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)

The surprise and severity of the Communist Tet Offensive of January 1968 convinced many Americans, including President Johnson, that victory in Vietnam was unattainable, and his forthcoming retirement from office heralded a turning point in the war. Richard M. Nixon, elected President in November 1968, announced his plan to gradually withdraw U.S. forces from the war and prepare the South Vietnamese armed forces to carry on the fight in a program known as “Vietnamization.”

During the years from 1968 to 1973, MSTS was responsible for returning much of the equipment of the 500,000-man U.S. expeditionary force to the United States; transporting the latest weapons to Vietnam for the RVNAF; and maintaining the flow of ammunition, fuel, and other supplies to the American troops still in country. Indeed, during the post-Tet years, the war was far from over.

The U.S. overseas logistics establishment changed some of the ways it did business, partly as a result of the Vietnam War experience. The Air Force renamed its Military Air Traffic Service the Military Airlift Command and in September 1970 the Navy retitled the Military Sea Transportation Service the Military Sealift Command (MSC). By the end of the war, most of the troops went to Vietnam and returned to the United States by air. Recognizing that fact, MSC inactivated its fleet of transports. It also culled its fleet of old freighters

and tankers and replaced them with newer and more technologically advanced ships.

When North Vietnam launched the Easter Offensive on March 30, 1972, only a small number of American military advisors remained in South Vietnam. President Nixon, however, immediately ordered increased logistics support for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. The Task Force 77 carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin and U.S. Air Force and Marine aircraft based in Thailand and South Vietnam also needed massive supplies of petroleum to help defeat the enemy’s assault. To meet this requirement MSC chartered 44 U.S. and foreign tankers. The need for this supply continued through the year as South Vietnamese ground troops, with U.S. air support, defeated North Vietnam’s offensive and President Nixon ordered the Operation Linebacker bombing campaign against North Vietnam.

The Department of Defense upgraded the weapons and equipment in the hands of the South Vietnamese under Project Enhance from May to October 1972. As peace talks resumed in Paris in October, the United States ordered a large-scale shipment of supplies to Vietnam in Operation Enhance Plus, before a treaty was signed. Beginning on October 12 and ending December 23, the Department of Defense shipped more than 105,000 tons of equipment, including 70,767 weapons, 382 artillery pieces, 622 tracked vehicles, and 2,035 wheeled vehicles—in total nearly \$2 billion worth of military hardware. The powerful allied military response finally convinced the leaders in Hanoi to



Crewmen of the amphibious cargo ship USS *Durham* (LKA 114) take Vietnamese refugees aboard a small craft in the South China Sea on April 3, 1975. The refugees will be transferred later by mechanized landing craft (LCM) to the freighter *Transcolorado*. (Journalist 1st Class Mike McGouhan/ National Archives and Records Administration image 428-K-108890)

settle the conflict. In accordance with the Paris Agreement of January 27, 1973, signed by the United States and the Vietnamese parties to the hostilities, all American military forces would be withdrawn from South Vietnam by March 29.

MSC, in Operation Roll-Up (January 28 to March 29), employed 20 merchant ships to remove 144,876 tons of U.S. military and 82,833 tons of allied military cargo. A civilian, D. E. Berney, took charge of MSC Office Vietnam when the last naval officer in charge, Commander T. J. Sullivan, left the country. The Alaska Barge and Transport Company closed its terminals and turned over its assets to the South Vietnamese government.

During the Vietnam War, MSTs/MSCs and the U.S. Merchant Marine mounted and sustained a trans-Pacific logistics operation equaled only by America's global effort in World War II. From July 1964 to March 1973, ships

under MSTs control transported more than 81 million tons of cargo and 97 million tons of fuel to Vietnam. In comparison, during World War II, the United States shipped 203 million tons of cargo and 64 million tons of petroleum. In 6,799 voyages to Vietnam, chartered and commercial ships delivered 64 percent of these cargos, MSC nucleus fleet ships transported 21 percent, and activated reserve fleet ships another 15 percent. Only the United States could have handled such a Herculean overseas operation in the 20th century.

The Military Sealift Command took center stage for the last major operation of the conflict in Indochina—the evacuation of refugees. That endeavor began on March 10, 1975, when North Vietnam's army launched its final offensive to seize South Vietnam. After lifting a total of 179,050 refugees by May 15, 1975, MSC's role in the Vietnam War was finally over.



CONCLUSION

The sealift effort mounted by the United States to support American and allied forces fighting in Vietnam was one of the most remarkable maritime logistics operations in military history. Military Sea Transportation Service, the National Defense Reserve Fleet, America's commercial shipping industry, and contracted foreign firms put to sea a mighty fleet that helped enable the United States to deny North Vietnam a quick conquest of the Republic of Vietnam. In two years—1965 and 1966—sealift ships transported 173,000 American and South Korean troops and their equipment to the combat theater. Simultaneously, cargo ships and tankers delivered the ammunition, fuel, food, building materials, and other supplies essential to the sustainment of an expeditionary force that, by 1968, totaled more than half a million troops. For over eight years, the sealift forces maintained the logistics pipeline across the broad Pacific Ocean and with the end of hostilities assisted in the humanitarian evacuation of more than 179,000 Americans, Vietnamese, and other friendly nationals from Indochina.

The sealift operation that entailed close to 7,000 ship transits to Vietnam succeeded because U.S. government agencies responsible for maritime affairs, the Navy and the other armed forces, American shipping firms, and friendly foreign governments cooperated to an unprecedented degree. Also instrumental to the success of the sealift operation were the MSTS/MSC commanders, especially Vice Adm. Glynn R. Donaho, Vice Adm. Lawson P. Ramage, and Vice Adm. Arthur R. Gralla, who oversaw much of the ambitious enterprise.

Enemy action in Vietnam (and the accidental loss of *SS Badger State* at sea with 6,109 tons of bombs) claimed 12 ships and 11 tugs and barges. Hostile forces also seized *Mayaguez* and her crew, albeit briefly. America's civilian mariners braved the dangers of the sea and the hostile environment of Vietnam to carry out their duties as their fathers had done in World War II and the Korean War. *Badger State's* tragedy cost the lives of 26 merchant seamen while enemy gunfire on the Long Tau

and Mekong rivers and mines in port and ashore killed another 25 U.S. naval officers, enlisted personnel, and American and non-American merchant mariners. Since there was no "front line" in Vietnam, even those service personnel at the bases sometimes became casualties.

In the early years allied logistics forces faced monumental challenges to accomplish the mission. Ships withdrawn from the National Defense Reserve Fleet, many of them built during World War II, needed significant repairs to ready them for service on the tempestuous North Pacific. Key U.S. ports were not accustomed to loading ships with huge stores of ammunition, fuel, heavy armored vehicles, and other bulky and sometimes dangerous cargo. The ports of South Vietnam, the final destination for this materiel, were woefully unprepared to accommodate hundreds of ships in their roadsteads and lacked requisite cranes or other off-loading equipment, warehouses, or fuel storage facilities. Initially, MSTS lacked sufficient or capable landing craft, barges, tugs, LARCs, or other conveyances to lighter cargo along the coast or transfer it across the beaches.

The sealift organizations, however, surmounted these obstacles with dogged determination and innovative thinking. The Maritime Administration and MSTS honed procedures for loading cargo in the United States and transporting it safely and expeditiously across the Pacific. The containerization of cargo and construction of container ships, championed by the pioneering Malcolm McLean, significantly improved the delivery of vital war supplies as did the chartering of additional foreign-flag ships. A crash construction program undertaken by the Army and MSTS provided the Republic of Vietnam with ports able to handle oceangoing ships. The revolutionary Delong Piers and the Newport facility near Saigon enhanced the off-loading process as did new warehouses, cargo hardstands, LST ramps, mobile cranes, and other cargo-handling equipment. Roll-on/roll-off ships sped the disembarkation of armored fighting vehicles. Advanced offshore discharge gear facilitated the transfer of fuel

supplies to the fighting forces ashore. Landing ships and craft, barges, and tugs—some operated and crewed by men from the Republic of Korea, Republic of China (Taiwan), and Thailand—eased the distribution of cargo to South Vietnam’s minor coastal ports and into the country’s rivers. LARCs and other amphibians enabled the transfer of cargo over unimproved beaches. The MSTs/MSC offices in Japan, the Philippines, Guam, Thailand, and Vietnam were critical to the efficient functioning of the overall sealift effort.

The Vietnam War’s huge draw on the country’s resources eventually compelled the U.S. Congress to reduce not only the nation’s military forces and overseas commitments but ships and personnel of the merchant marine and MSC. The 965-ship merchant fleet of 1965 had been reduced by 1975 to 517 vessels. During the same period MSC’s fleet dropped from 201 to 161 ships. Fewer than half of the 48,273 merchant mariners and 9,809 other civilians serving with MSC in 1965 remained on the job in 1975.

Nevertheless, the war in Vietnam inspired the U.S. maritime organizations to modernize and streamline their resources in preparation for future

conflicts. The Military Sealift Command Maritime Administration eliminated almost all of its troopships, aircraft transports, and old break-bulk freighters and tankers in the reserve fleet. In 1977 the U.S. government created within the National Defense Reserve Fleet the Ready Reserve Force and eventually provided the new organization with 102 of the most advanced cargo ships, tankers, and other support vessels. Five tankers were

This acrylic drawing by John Steel depicts USS *Chemung* (AO 3) refueling USS *Hooper* (DE 1026) in the South China Sea in 1966. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

equipped with hoses and other equipment enabling them to transfer fuel ashore from a point three miles out to sea. Congress also funded the construction of advanced roll-on/roll-off ships and container ships equipped with cranes that could off-load other ships as well as themselves.

The proof that America’s maritime organizations had profited from the Vietnam experience was plain to see 15 years later in the Persian Gulf War. Just two weeks





About the Author

Salvatore R. Mercogliano, Ph.D., has been an associate professor of history at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina, since 2010. He teaches courses in Western civilization, U.S. history, American military experience, the Civil War, and world maritime history. He was named Professor of the Year in 2015 and 2011 and honored by his colleagues with the D. P. Russ Jr. and Walter S. Jones Sr. Alumni Award for Teaching Excellence. He has also taught at Methodist University, East Carolina University, Central Carolina Community College, the U.S. Military Academy, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Dr. Mercogliano has published numerous articles and given presentations on a variety of maritime related topics, with a focus on the role of the merchant marine in national defense. He holds degrees from the State University of New York Maritime College (BS in Marine Transportation), East Carolina University (MA in Maritime History and Nautical Archeology), and the University of Alabama (PhD in Military and Naval History), along with his U.S. Merchant Marine-deck license. Dr. Mercogliano lives in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina, with his wife Kathy and son Christopher.

after the August 2, 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces, a trio of MPS ships off-loaded the armored fighting vehicles, ammunition, and equipment of a Marine expeditionary brigade in Saudi Arabia. The troops arrived soon afterward by air. On the 25th, other MPSs discharged the gear and supplies for a second MEB in Saudi ports. Hence, in relatively short order, strong U.S. ground units were on hand to deter or defeat an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia. This rapid deployment of combat forces validated the maritime prepositioning concept. The Ready Reserve Force (RRF) also earned its keep in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The activated ships of the RRF, along with the fast sealift

ships and ships of the U.S. and foreign merchant fleets, transported a half-million-strong U.S. combat contingent to the theater of war in only seven months. In June 2002 USNS *Watson* (T-AKR 310) off-loaded cargo in Kuwait and was followed by 154 other vessels in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Years of effort by the U.S. maritime organizations and the sacrifices made by MSC personnel and American and foreign civilian merchant mariners did not bring victory in the Vietnam War. But the 10-year experience deploying and supplying allied forces in Southeast Asia strengthened the U.S. sealift establishment for the challenges of the future.





THE DAYBOOK
HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM
ONE WATERSIDE DRIVE, SUITE 248
NORFOLK, VA 23510-1607

Official Business

PRSR STD
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
REGIONAL NAVY MAIL CENTER
PERMIT NO. 2235
NORFOLK VA

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



A minesweeping boat moves past the freighter *American Corsair* on the Long Tau River. Trailing behind the boat is a flag marking the location of the boat's sweep gear. The 57-foot "Sweeps" are responsible for protecting shipping on the river, which is the main artery for Allied supplies coming into the docks around Saigon. Released April 26, 1969. (Journalist 1st Class Tom Walton/ Naval History and Heritage Command Image)