

PBRs – Vietnam Mission and Early History

PBR (acronym for **P**atrol **B**oat, **R**iverine)

River Patrol Force, a part of ***Task Force 116***, later code-named ***Operation Game Warden***. AKA - ***The Brown Water Navy*** (a reference to the muddy waters of South Vietnam as they flowed to the Sea).

Task Force 116 was made up of several units, including SEAL teams. A crew of four men on each of two boats logged 70,000 hours a month in an average of 80 firefights.

The units patrolled thousands of miles of muddy rivers in South Vietnam in boats armed with twin machine guns on the bow, another in the stern and a grenade launcher and an M60 machine gun in the center. The crew scouted 12 to 14 hours daily, constantly stressed about whether an ambush was waiting. The jungle was right up to the shoreline. There could be 1,000 guys hiding behind trees and you could not see them.

One of the primary missions was to check every vessel for enemy weapons and supplies. Everything moved through the rivers. Riverboats often raced up the river, unleashing gunfire and grenades while passing the enemy at top speed. Their best defense was their speed and their guns.

An Early History of The PBR – Operation Game Warden

December 1965-

GAME WARDEN was planned in December for operations in river mouths and estuaries of the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone. Objectives will be to prevent VC infiltration, interdict traffic and supplies at river crossings, and isolate the enemy in areas that are bounded by rivers and canals. By this effort substantial Navy support would be given to the Vietnamese Navy River Assault Groups.

Forces will be composed of 100 31-foot fiberglass River Patrol Boats (PBR) , 20 landing craft (LCPL) based at eight locations in the Delta, and three LST's anchored in principal river mouths. Operations are planned to be similar to MARKET TIME, but with the added hazard of continuous operations within weapon range of river banks. In-country logistic support will come from two major maintenance facilities at Nha Be and Can Tho, with minor maintenance available at the six other bases plus support from the three LST's.

February 1966 -

In order to keep the men, equipment, and food originating in the rich, densely populated Mekong Delta from reaching VC strongholds in the Central Highlands of RVN, Chief Naval Advisory Group was directed to establish a patrol force in the major rivers of the Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ) which encompasses the major ship channels to Saigon.

GAME WARDEN was the nickname assigned, and TF 116 became the designator. Limited operations were expected to commence in March. By the end of the month the first two officers and one enlisted man had arrived. As future Corps Tactical Operations Center personnel, they were assigned familiarization watches, first in CTF 115 operations, and then at a MARKET TIME Coastal Surveillance Center.

The forces anticipated for the RSSZ were 20 LCPL's and 10 PBR's. For controlling the rivers, 60 PBR's would be needed in addition to the VNN River Assault Groups (RAG), national police, ARVN regional and popular force boat companies, and, as required, observation and strike aircraft. Any operations on rivers near the Cambodian border would be coordinated with U. S. Special Forces who held that responsibility.

March 1966 -

Eleven PBRs, the first of the River Patrol Force (CTF 116), arrived on 21 March, followed by an additional nine units on 30 March. These fiberglass boats are 31 feet long, displace only 2.5 feet, and have a maximum speed of 25 knots. They are armed with a twin .50 caliber and a single .30 caliber machine gun. A total of 120 PBRs have been ordered for delivery to South Vietnam.

The River Patrol Force is intended for operation in the Mekong Delta, the Delta estuaries, and the Rung Sat Special Zone. Administrative control is exercised by River Squadron 5, homeported in San Diego, which was established on 15 March. Operational control derives from Commander Naval Forces Vietnam.

During March, training and area indoctrination for PBR crews were conducted in the area of Vung Tau. Numerous boat alterations were under consideration and experimentation. The first of eight permanent GAME WARDEN bases, located at Cat Lo, was partially completed. With the exception of the site at Vinh Long, land had been acquired for the other bases.

From 21 to 24 March, a GAME WARDEN conference was held at CINCPAC headquarters at which a number of important decisions were taken. One of these was to assign to the Service Force, Pacific Fleet, responsibilities for all maintenance except for emergency repairs. Necessary steps were also taken to establish personnel allowances for GAME WARDEN. Of 84 officer and 1159 enlisted billets, 69 officers and 688 enlisted were assigned to River Squadron 5. The balance will man the support bases.

April 1966 -

Operation GAME WARDEN entered its fledgling stages during April as the first PBRs became operational and patrolled the waters of the Rung Sat Special Zone. As the new

crews received area indoctrination and training, construction of new bases in the Mekong Delta area continued in preparation for the arrival of the first patrol units during the forthcoming months.

The departure of the SEVENTH Fleet Marine Amphibious Force from the Rung Sat Special Zone on 7 April signalled the termination of Operation JACKSTAY. Highly successful in terms of equipment and facilities captured or destroyed, JACKSTAY also resulted in 63 Viet Cong killed. But the likelihood was great that Viet Cong forces in the area would attempt to re-infiltrate into the Rung Sat Special Zone and establish once again their secure bases.

To counter this possibility by denying the Viet Cong use of the major waterways in the Rung Sat Special Zone, the CTF 115 river patrols established during JACKSTAY were maintained after completion of the operation. The ten patrol stations were to be manned by five WPBs and four PCFs. Two LCPLs, the UH-1B fire teams, and the MSBs were to assist. The PBRs were scheduled to phase in when operationally ready. Vietnamese Navy assistance was also requested. On 6 April, the units chopped to operational control of CTG 116.2, and commenced patrol.

On 8 April, Vietnamese Navy units relieved two stations, freeing one WPB and one PCF for MARKET TIME patrol. River Assault Group units, consisting of one commandament, one FOM (similar to STCAN), and one monitor, assumed patrols on the upper Soirap River. Other VNN units patrolled the eastern reach of the Vamco River and the Dong Tranh River.

On 8 April, the PBRs of River Patrol Section 541 commenced orientation patrols with PCFs and was on the Long Tau River stations. On 15 April, the PBRs reported they were ready to assume any two stations. On the following day, the PBRs commenced patrol, resulting in two PCFs and two WPBs released for MARKET TIME operations. This resulted in seven stations manned continually by United States units: two by PBRs, three by WPBs and two by PCFs. PBRs occupied one additional station vacated by Vietnamese Navy units on 16 April.

The Soirap River patrol stations continued to meet with success as the Viet Cong persisted in their attempts to utilize this waterway. On 17 April, PCF 23 illuminated a contact attempting to cross the Soirap River just north of the Vam Sat River mouth. The sampan maintained speed and opened fire with small arms. Four people in the sampan

jumped overboard as PCF 23 returned the fire. The sampan was taken in tow but subsequently sank. Enemy shore fire prevented a continued search of the area. The effectiveness of the Soirap River patrols can also be measured in terms of the stepped-up harassment of patrol units. On numerous occasions during the month, the boats came under moderate to heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire from the banks. Most of the harassing fire was received in the section near the mouth of the Vam Sat River, a known infiltration route terminal and the scene of considerable action during March and April. Shore fire was also received on two occasions near the mouth of the Soirap River.

Meanwhile the Long Tau River patrol stations continued relatively quiet. Intelligence reports during the month indicated a partial shift in Viet Cong infiltration patterns into the Rung Sat Special Zone, with traffic entering from the east, originating in Viet Cong strongholds in Phuoc Tuy Province. However, no evidence of this was uncovered by the Long Tau River patrols. One reason for this may exist in the fact that the Long Tau River, with its narrow, sinuous channel, presents a much more difficult patrol area than the wide, straight Soirap River. With the exception of the wide section near the mouth of Ganh Rai Bay, transit across the Long Tau can be accomplished quickly, making detection difficult.

On 26 April, an additional twelve PBRs arrived at Cat Lo. These units commenced shakedown cruises from the base at Cat Lo and from USS FLOYD COUNTY (LST 762), which had arrived in country on 12 April to become the second Inshore Support ship. River Division 51 was activated on 27 April aboard USS TORTUGA (LSD 26) in preparation for the first transit into the Mekong Delta in May. The new units were designated River Section 512.

While crew performance during the initial month of PBR operations was regarded as excellent, numerous problem areas arose in the boats themselves. The narrow vinyl beading which served as a fender was not adequate protection when boarding and searching larger junks, or when alongside a support ship. This resulted in damage to the side. To correct this, discarded helicopter tires were obtained for use as fenders. Armor plating around the forward gun mount has been removed on all boats to improve gunner and coxswain visibility and communications. M-72s, one-time-only antitank rockets, are being carried on all boats as interim ordnance pending approval and installation of the

Mark 18, 40mm rapid fire grenade launcher. In another ordnance improvement, .50 caliber machine guns are being installed in place of the after .30 caliber machine guns.

May 1966 -

Operation GAME WARDEN expanded during May as the first river patrol units moved into the Mekong Delta. Activity continued in the Rung Sat Special Zone where patrols continued to interdict Viet Cong movement while U.S. Army Operation LEXINGTON III destroyed numerous enemy facilities. Viet Cong mining activities re-emerged as a very real threat in an incident at the Nha Be anchorage.

On the afternoon of 18 May, Captain B. B. WITHAM, Jr., USN assumed command of the River Patrol Force. Ceremonies were held at the GAME WARDEN base at Nha Be.

(1) Rung Sat Special Zone Activities

Heavy Viet Cong harrassment of U.S. patrol units on the Soirap River north of the entrance to the Vam Co River took place during the early days of May, a continuation of similar events during April. Starting the evening of 30 April and continuing for five successive nights, USCGC POINT PARTRIDGE, on patrol four miles north of the entrance to the Vam Co River, received small arms and automatic weapons fire from the west bank of the Soirap River. On each occasion POINT PARTRIDGE returned the fire with her .50 caliber machine guns and 81mm mortar. On 1 and 3 May she also received assistance from helicopter fire teams.

On 5 May, POINT PARTRIDGE engaged a single sampan near to this location crossing the Soirap from east to west. The occupants, estimated at four, were forced to abandon their vessel which POINT PARTRIDGE then took in tow. On board were found. two Chinese Communist carbines, each with seven rounds of 7.62 ammunition. The principal cargo, however, was a large quantity of 16 foot pointed bamboo stakes, evaluated as anti-helicopter poles. Also recovered were 50 five gallon water drums and some personal papers.

Contrary to presumed Viet Cong movement tactics, this incident took place at low tide under a full moon. Previous studies of tactics reveal that the Viet Cong usually take advantage of the dark phases of the moon and high tide to move their supplies.

During May, the helicopter fire teams, operating from TORTUGA accounted for four Viet Cong killed, four sampans destroyed, 19 sampans damaged and five Viet Cong

structures destroyed. They flew 31 armed reconnaissance missions, 25 rapid reaction missions, sixteen escort missions and seven medical evacuation missions. For a GAME WARDEN statistical summary, see Appendix.

(2) Loss of PCF 41

On 22 May, while on patrol in the RSSZ in support of U.S. Army Operation LEXINGTON III, PCF 41 came under fire from a heavy caliber weapon on the east bank of the Dinh Ba River. A hit was sustained in the lower half of the starboard bulkhead of the pilot house, killing the coxswain, wounding the radioman and destroying most of the equipment in the pilot house. Within seconds of the initial hit, a mine exploded adjacent to the PCF, resulting in possible bottom damage. PCF 41 returned the fire and accelerated at maximum speed. However, steering control had been lost, and the boat ran aground before control could be regained.

Due to location of the craft in VC territory, impending darkness, lack of radio communications, and an outgoing tide, PCF 41 was abandoned after jettisoning the after .50 caliber machine gun, the URC-58 radio and some of the ammunition. The life raft was then launched and the crew, equipped with small arms, proceeded southeast until picked up by PCF 37. The one wounded man was then transferred to Dong Hoa Village for helicopter medical evacuation. The remainder of the crew was taken to Vung Tau for treatment of shock and minor injuries.

A Reaction Force was then ordered into the area to prevent any Viet Cong attempts to strip PCF 41. They removed the one body along with the forward .50 caliber machine guns, the starlight scope and the remaining ammunition. An incendiary grenade was used in an attempt to render the mortar useless. They then tried to tow the PCF from the sand bar where it had grounded, but severe bottom damage caused it to sink in midstream in about twenty-five feet of water. This was the second PCF lost to enemy action.

(3) LEXINGTON III

Operation LEXINGTON III, a U.S. Army search and destroy operation in the RSSZ, took place between 21 May and 9 June. Both U.S. Navy and Vietnamese Navy units played an active part with some units lifting weapons and other supplies to specified locations, while others played vital roles in amphibious landings. Still others provided diversion

tactics. GAME WARDEN units conducted anti-infiltration/exfiltration patrols with their eight PBRs and three PCFs, and Navy SEAL teams conducted several ambushes. LEXINGTON III accounted for 35 VC killed. Thirty weapons were captured, and numerous base camps and fortified positions were destroyed. Also sunk or destroyed were 29 sampans. Only one friendly was KIA and four wounded.

(4) Minings at Nha Be

The ability of the Viet Cong to infiltrate a secure port and inflict serious damage on shipping was confirmed on the morning of 26 May. At 0150 a loud explosion resounded through the Nha Be anchorage followed by a series of distress signals from a ship's fog horn. The GAME WARDEN base at Nha Be immediately went to general quarters, and PBRs and units of VNN RAG 22 were sent to investigate.

The PBRs reported that the ship EASTERN MARINER, of Panamanian registry and carrying a cargo of 4000 tons of bagged cement, was settling by the stern with a slight starboard list. Twelve feet of freeboard was remaining and the crew was abandoning ship. The PBRs and RAG 22 units rescued the crew and brought them to Nha Be., There were no casualties.

Divers revealed a twelve foot by ten foot hole in the starboard quarter and recovered remnants of nylon cord, indicating that a mine had been attached to the ship.

On the same morning a tugboat reported to the MSTS Office, Nha Be, that a second explosion had occurred near another ship anchored about 350 yards from EASTERN MARINER. Investigation revealed no damage, but examination of her anchor chain showed an attached nylon cord, evaluated as having been used to affix a mine.

On another ship a mine attached to the anchor chain was discovered and removed in time. It contained about 130 pounds of TNT rigged to be electrically detonated by a double timing device attached to the mine. EOD personnel reported it was attached to the anchor chain by metal hooks and nylon parachute cord which allowed the mine to drift back under the ship with the current.

The one successful mining and two attempted minings prompted a quick re-evaluation of the anchorage security requirements for Nha Be, and all ships were advised not to heave around on their chains or turn their screws until they had received an underwater inspection.

(5) Mekong Delta Activities

The first operational test of the GAME WARDEN concept in the Mekong Delta commenced on 8 May near Can Tho. Upon arrival there, the PBRs underwent a week of area familiarization and training. On 15 May two PBRs were distributing leaflets describing new curfew hours on the Bassac River when they received automatic weapons fire at a point 15 miles southwest of Can Tho. They cleared the area with no casualties or damage. However, on the return trip they again came under heavy, constant automatic weapons fire that wounded two crewmen and lightly damaged both PBRs. Fish traps across the river had forced them to a position close to shore and increased their vulnerability.

On 17 May, in their first night action, PBRs had a similar experience, which was repeated several times during the month. The use of heavy shore fire to cover the transport of supplies across rivers was a familiar tactic, but these incidents were the first involving U.S. patrol boats on the Mekong Delta waterways.

(6) PBRs

The addition of 16 PBRs during May brought the total of the boats in country to 47. However, the rapid tempo of operations in the RSSZ during May taxed both the crews and their boats. PBRs ran twelve hour patrols with an additional two to three hours spent transiting to and from patrol areas. In addition, most River Patrol Sections were required to perform their own maintenance.

Operations from the LST and LSD interim support ships showed that a high order of seamanship was required to prevent damage to the PBRs when moderate seas were running.

Three problem areas came to light in the PBRs themselves during the month. Numerous pump drive shaft casualties were experienced. Surface corrosion occurred on pump grill inserts and pump suction pieces and on the seats for the impeller wear rings. The third problem was the inability of the PBRs to make their designed speed of twenty-five knots, probably due to excessive weight. Naval Ship Systems Command was asked to make an investigation.

June – 1966

The arrival of sixteen new PBRs (total - 63) and the movement of two additional River Patrol Sections into the Mekong Delta highlighted GAME WARDEN operations during

June. In the Rung Sat Special Zone PBRs assumed the remaining stations occupied by PCFs, releasing them for MARKET TIME. An assessment of the early stages of GAME WARDEN indicated the operation was accomplishing its mission of interdicting VC movements on the major rivers of the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ), and on that portion of the Bassac River in the vicinity of Can Tho where the initial Delta Patrols were being conducted. (See Appendix IV).

The PBRs continued to experience extensive surface corrosion. Especially susceptible were the Jacuzzi pump grill inserts. Shaft casualties also continued to be a problem. New type, stronger shafts that were on order had not been received by the end of the month. During June, RIVRONFIVE commenced issuing Squadron Maintenance Bulletins covering maintenance problems encountered in the PBRs. These were sent to all River Divisions, River Patrol Sections, and Naval Support Activity, Saigon detachments that support PBRs.

Initial GAME WARDEN Assessment

Indications were that the Viet Cong were slowly being starved out of large areas of the RSSZ, a region traditionally under enemy control. The employment of ground forces to strike at the heart of the RSSZ - Operations JACKSTAY, LEXINGTON III, and continuing VNN and Regional Force operations -- destroyed large quantities of food, arms and ammunition, and numerous Viet Cong facilities. Continuous GAME WARDEN patrols in support of these operations contributed to the disruption of resupply routes, and a marked reduction in the number and scope of VC initiated incidents was indicative of the enemy's loss of freedom of action. LSD/LST based UH-IB fire teams were effectively employed for direct PBR support, and for armed reconnaissance and preplanned strikes.

Although GAME WARDEN forces in the Delta were not yet at full strength, initial experience with the one section operating from the temporary base at Can Tho was noteworthy. On two known occasions attempted crossings by Viet Cong units were stopped by patrols. Reports from the IV Corps Tactical Zone indicated that VC commanders voiced concern at the presence of the U.S. craft on the river. Disruption of VC tax collectors on the Bassac River was confirmed by the Tre On Village Chief, who stated that the arrival of the PBRs enabled villagers for the first time to transport their

produce to Can Tho without paying taxes. The VNN commander of the Fourth Riverine Area considered friendly river traffic of the Bassac to be markedly increased. In addition, the influence of PBR night patrols resulted in increased RAG 25 patrol activity during the daytime.

Based on this initial assessment, GAME WARDEN was considered to be an important deterrent to Viet Cong movements on and across the major rivers of the Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone. Increased effectiveness was anticipated as additional boats and bases become operational and the crews develop tactics to counter Viet Cong efforts.

July 1966 –

The focus of in-country naval action shifted to Operation GAME WARDEN during July as the PBRs increasingly deterred Viet Cong waterborne movement. Helicopter fire teams were also effective, both in support of the PBRs and in independent strikes on Viet Cong units. The SEAL Team, operating in the Rung Sat Special Zone, conducted its most successful operations to date. Eight additional PBRs (71) were added to GAME WARDEN forces during the month.

EARLY statistical summary of GAME WARDEN (Dec 1965 to July 1966):

PBR Statistics:

Total Patrols (two boats):	Day 321	Night 461
Total Contacts:	Day 17,739	Night 3,065
Total Inspected:	Day 3,994	Night 603
Total Boarded:	Day 4,686	Night 841
Persons Detained:	899	
Total Patrol Hours:	15,414	

Total Possible Patrols: 1,953

Total Patrols: 1,564

Usage: 80+%

Helo Fire Team Statistics:

Structures: Destroyed 28 Damaged 101

Sampan: Destroyed 13 Damaged 59

Total Flight Hours: 212

Helo Missions Supported:

17 reaction support of the river patrol

43 armed reconnaissance

31 logistic

2 medical evacuations

SEAL Team Statistics:

Structures: Destroyed 8 Damaged 0

GAME WARDEN Totals:

Structures: Destroyed 36 Damaged 101

Sampan: Destroyed 26 Damaged 61

Enemy KIA: BC 18 EST 38 WIA 2

Friendly KIA: KIA 0 WIA 3

PBRs played an unusual role on 29 July when they provided emergency transportation for U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and RADM N. Go WARD, COMNAVFORV, after their helicopter had been forced down by monsoon rains at VNN Coastal Group 35 Base. The Ambassador and his party had just completed a visit to USS TORTUGA (LSD 26) for a briefing of her role in GAME WARDEN. After receiving a message that the

party was down, TORTUGA dispatched a PBR patrol to return them to the ship. They remained on board overnight and were transported to Saigon the following morning by the helicopter fire team. Operating from USS TORTUGA (LSD 26) off the mouths of the Bassac and Co Chien Rivers, the helicopter fire teams logged an impressive number of successful strikes at Viet Cong boats and facilities during July. The majority of these strikes were in the area of Long Toan and Thanh Phong Secret Zones, known Viet Cong strongholds and staging areas. At 1820, 4 July, a helicopter fire team took a large number of sampans under fire in the Long Toan Secret Zone. One sampan disintegrated in a secondary explosion. Six others were damaged, while a number of additional sampans took cover under foliage. During the action three PBRs were set as a blocking force in the Co Chien River estuary in the event the Viet Cong attempted to cross.

Bill Ferguson, assigned to River Division 533, earned the Bronze Star on Nov. 3, 1969, when he captained the lead boat in a three-vessel patrol on the Ong Doc River. The crews were patrolling at night when a rocket struck and sank the second boat. The third PBR ran aground trying to avoid the disabled vessel.

Under heavy fire, Ferguson swung his boat around and picked up two men from the water while his men fired at the shoreline. The crew then tied a line to the beached vessel, still under fire, and pulled it free. Every sailor was rescued. Ferguson didn't realize until after the fighting had stopped that shrapnel had embedded in his neck and cut his arm. The shards, he said, were still working their way out of his skin a year later.