The Mekong Delta, where the Mekong River fans out and empties into the South China Sea, was one of the most economically and strategically important areas of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Six million people, nearly 40 percent of South Vietnam’s population, lived in this humid wetland region south of Saigon.

With its rich, fertile soil and plentiful water, the Delta produced most of the country’s rice crop, and its 3,000-mile network of waterways afforded farmers an efficient means to transport their produce to market. But in 1965, a group of Communist insurgents, known to U.S. troops as the Viet Cong, dominated the Mekong Delta and the adjacent Rung Sat mangrove swamp. From their concealed bases in the Delta, Viet Cong troops launched attacks against nearby allied forces and harassed water traffic moving in and out of the port at Saigon. The Delta became a stronghold for the Viet Cong, and they exploited the area as a source of food and supplies, collecting taxes from the local populace. In order to secure the Delta and restore it to Saigon’s control, the United States determined to clear out the insurgents with a series of riverine campaigns.

**TASK FORCE 116 AND OPERATION GAME WARDEN**

To loosen the Viet Cong’s grip on the Delta, the U.S. Navy established Task Force 116 in late 1965. Comprised of armed patrol boats, landing crafts, helicopters, and other vessels, Task Force 116 initiated Operation GAME WARDEN: the campaign to interdict Communist military activity along the waterways of the Mekong Delta and Rung Sat.

The first crews of Task Force 116 arrived in Vietnam in early 1966. They manned river patrol boats (PBRs), which were organized into divisions and based around tank landing ships (LSTs) and dock landing ships (LSDs) anchored in rivers. The task force also incorporated a squadron of UH-1 “Huey” helicopters, nicknamed the “Seawolves,” for air support. Typical GAME WARDEN missions included patrolling rivers and canals searching boats, junks, and sampans for enemy contraband, enforcing curfews, supporting allied ground troops, and clearing mines and enemies from shipping channels, especially between Saigon and the South China Sea.

By the end of 1967, Task Force 116 had secured substantial portions of the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat. During that year alone, task force personnel inspected tens of thousands of vessels and destroyed, damaged, or captured about 2,000 Viet Cong watercraft along with large amounts of enemy supplies and equipment. These efforts made it difficult for the Viet Cong to continue using the Delta and the Rung Sat as refuges and bases of operations.

**RIVER PATROL BOATS**

The Navy introduced the 31-foot long river patrol boat (officially Patrol Boat, River; or PBR) in early 1966. It became an iconic riverine operations vessel in Vietnam, and it was the workhorse boat of Task Force 116 and Operation GAME WARDEN. PBRs typically were manned by a crew of four and equipped with a single machine gun and VHF radio. They were armed with twin 50-caliber machine guns mounted forward, a 30-caliber machine gun and a .50-caliber machine gun abreast, port and starboard, and a single .50-caliber machine gun aft. PBRs traditionally operated in pairs, with a “lead” and “cover” boat. They were fast and maneuverable, using water-jet engines to reach speeds of 30 knots and operate in as little as two feet of water.
At the end of 1966, U.S. officials estimated that there were as many as 50,000 Viet Cong combatants in the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat mangrove swamp, representing perhaps 45 percent of the total strength of the insurgency. GAME WARDEN operations prevented insurgents from openly using most waterways, but to pursue and engage the Viet Cong in the fields, paddies, and lowlands of the Delta, the United States established the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force (MRF).

MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE

The Mobile Riverine Force became operational in early 1967. Navy transport and assault vessels assigned to the MRF carried troops of the Army 9th Infantry Division, which engaged enemy forces in amphibious search-and-destroy operations near waterways. MRF vessels then returned to station to provide gunfire support and to pick up the infantrymen once the battle ended. MRF actions could last from hours to days, after which personnel returned to their bases, either on shore or aboard floating barracks and maintenance ships. The force’s main shore base was at Dong Tam, northwest of My Tho between the Delta and the Rung Sat, but the MRF’s floating mobile bases moved where they were needed.

The MRF consisted of a host of patrol boats and armored troop carriers (ATCs), while heavily armored and armed mechanized landing craft, nicknamed “minutemen” for their likeness to nineteenth-century warships, served as the “battleships” of the force. Additional watercraft functioned as helicopter landing pads, medical boats, and refueling and resupply vessels. The MRF’s greatest strengths were its mobility and flexibility. It could transport over 500 Soldiers and resupply vessels. The MRF’s greatest strengths were its mobility and flexibility. It could transport over 500 Soldiers and resupply vessels. The MRF’s greatest strengths were its mobility and flexibility. It could transport over 500 Soldiers and resupply vessels. The MRF’s greatest strengths were its mobility and flexibility. It could transport over 500 Soldiers and resupply vessels.

"The Mobile Riverine Force saved the Delta [during Tet].” — GEN William C. Westmoreland, former commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

THE TET OFFENSIVE

In January 1968, Communist forces launched the Tet Offensive. Over 84,000 troops, mostly Viet Cong, simultaneously attacked hundreds of bases, cities, and towns across South Vietnam. In the Delta, the scale of the offensive caught Task Force 116 and the Mobile Riverine Force off-guard. However, they recovered quickly and proved crucial in repelling attacks on numerous regional towns.

Within weeks, Task Force 116 and the MRF reestablished control over the major river towns and were able to provide critical fire support for besieged allied troops. U.S. riverine units were instrumental in defending My Tho, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and Can Tho, among other towns. The MRF’s efforts were especially significant during Tet. The force’s ability to quickly bring firepower and ground forces into action throughout the sprawling Delta made it difficult for the Viet Cong to exploit or consolidate any initial gains. The MRF conducted operations in eight provinces during February alone. Task Force 116, and additional riverine units further north near the Demilitarized Zone, also played vital roles in defeating the Tet Offensive, particularly by providing combat support for the defenders of Khe Sanh and the city of Hue.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT
SPECIALIST FOURTH CLASS THOMAS KINSMAN
U.S. ARMY

On February 6, 1968, near Vinh Long in the Mekong Delta, Specialist Fourth Class Thomas Kinsman (then Private First Class), a riflemen in 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, was doing a reconnaissance-in-force mission. As his company moved up a narrow canal aboard ATCs, it came under sudden, intense rocket and automatic fire from a well-entrenched Viet Cong force. The company immediately beached their vessels and attacked the enemy position, which was hidden in dense vegetation. With limited visibility, a group of eight men, including Kinsman, were cut off from the main company. While the men attempted to link up with their comrades, a Viet Cong soldier hurled a grenade into their midst. Kinsman quickly alerted the group and threw himself on the grenade, blocking the explosion with his body. As a result of his courageous action, he received severe head and chest wounds. Kinsman’s bravery, complete disregard for his own safety, and concern for his fellow Soldiers avowed loss of life and injury to the other seven men around him.

A GRATEFUL NATION THANKS AND HONORS OUR VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

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A Tet Offensive was a tactical victory for America and allied forces, but 1968 and 1969 were the deadliest years of the war for American troops, and the United States appeared no closer to winning. Task Force 116 and the Mobile Riverine Force secured most of the key waterways in the Mekong Delta and the lower two-thirds of the Mekong Delta by late 1968. But the North Vietnamese remained committed to the war, and the Viet Cong insurgency regrouped in the more remote waterways of the upper Delta and Cambodia, and enemy troops and weapons continued to flow into South Vietnam.

**SEALORDS**

Tet decimated the ranks of the Viet Cong, but the insurgents found sanctuaries along the more remote streams and canals of the upper Delta, near the Cambodian border. From there, they continued guerrilla activities and facilitated the ongoing movement of enemy troops, ammunition, arms, and supplies into South Vietnam from Cambodia, partially frustrating overall allied progress. A U.S. information leaflet distributed during the Tet Offensive stated that “The enemy is not defeated. He is not destroyed. He is merely driven underground.”

**MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT, PETTY OFFICER FIRST CLASS JAMES WILLIAMS, U.S. NAVY**

On October 31, 1966, two PBRs under the command of Petty Officer First Class James Williams encountered multiple Viet Cong sampans along a small stream. The enemy opened fire, and the PBRs returned fire, sinking one sampan while the other fled up the small stream. In the face of heavy fire, Williams’s two PBRs followed the fleeing sampans, but quickly came under heavy fire from additional Viet Cong forces along the shore. Pressing ahead, the U.S. boats encountered a large number of enemy vessels. After calling for helicopter gunship support, Williams’s PBRs attacked, and they pressed their assault for three hours. Only after the PBRs’ ammunition was exhausted did Williams order a withdrawal. American forces destroyed a total of 70 enemy watercraft in the engagement.

In order to secure the remaining waters of the Delta and interdict infiltration across the Cambodian border, U.S. leaders formed a new task force, which launched the Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy (SEALORDS). Known as Task Force 194, it combined elements from Task Force 116, the Mobile Riverine Force, and coastal surveillance units to patrol the upper regions of the Delta, from Tay Ninh to the Gulf of Thailand. There it harassed enemy forces and formed barriers and blockades near the border where Communist troops regularly infiltrated South Vietnam by water.

**VIETNAMIZATION**

Even with these accomplishments in the Mekong Delta, the war dragged on, and President Richard M. Nixon was elected in 1968 promising to extricate the United States from Southeast Asia. His administration committed to “Vietnamization,” gradually handing responsibility for the war over to the South Vietnamese military. Other American riverine and maritime forces soon followed, and coastal surveillance personnel and Task Force 116 transferred most of their vessels and aircraft to South Vietnamese navy by 1971. These turnovers largely ended major U.S. riverine operations in Vietnam. The United States reached a peace agreement with North Vietnam in early 1973, but the war continued and South Vietnam ultimately fell to Communist forces in 1975.

**A Note to the American Reader**

The Tet Offensive was a tactical victory for America and allied forces, but 1968 and 1969 were the deadliest years of the war for American troops, and the United States appeared no closer to winning. Task Force 116 and the Mobile Riverine Force secured most of the key waterways in the Mekong Delta and the lower two-thirds of the Mekong Delta by late 1968. But the North Vietnamese remained committed to the war, and the Viet Cong insurgency regrouped in the more remote waterways of the upper Delta and Cambodia, and enemy troops and weapons continued to flow into South Vietnam.

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