

Foreword

David Bruhn's *Gators Offshore and Upriver* provides a thorough insight into the extensive series of amphibious landings conducted by the US Marine Corps Special Landing Force during the Vietnam War. He also reviews the role amphibious ships played in the activities undertaken by the coastal surveillance force (TF 115), the river patrol force (TF 116), the mobile riverine force (TF 117) and Operation SEALORDS (TF 194). As such, it complements the description of naval activity in that war in his earlier book *On the Gunline*, which outlined the major role the surface combatants played, supporting the troops ashore.

As the book demonstrates, the Gator Navy provided a valuable contribution to the war effort, the Landing Ship Tanks (LST) being the work horses, comprising 62 of the 142 amphibious ships deployed to the war zone. Before examining the many amphibious operations undertaken, the author provides an extensive description of the various ship classes that make up the Gator Navy. This is a valuable reference section and useful to the reader to gain additional information about particular types or classes of ships.

Direct support to the campaign in South Vietnam was provided by the long-established Amphibious Ready Group and Special Landing Force (ARG/SLF). This powerful, versatile, and mobile formation supported assault operations along the length of the South Vietnamese littoral. The book clearly shows how versatile and important this sea-based support was to the war effort. The amphibious force was often used to extend the allied flank at sea, block enemy movements, land troops behind the enemy, and to reinforce front-line units.

The significant contribution to the brown-water navy illustrates how versatile the Gator Navy proved to be with the LSTs becoming the 'battleships of the Delta War.' They also provided support facilities to the many boats in the river patrol force and the mobile riverine force. One of the most significant features on these afloat bases were the helicopter pads. Helicopters evacuated the wounded and provided patrol boats with reconnaissance and fire support.

The impact of a swimmer-sapper attack in the Mekong Delta in November 1968 on the LST USS *Westchester County* is described in the opening chapter of *Gators Offshore and Upriver*. This attack resulted in 25 personnel being killed and 22 wounded which accounted for the US Navy's greatest single-incident combat loss of life during the entire Vietnam War. This incident also marked an increase in swimmer-sapper activity. In early 1969, I was sent to Vietnam to brief COMNAVFOR-V staff on RAN swimmer saboteur defence concepts and to assist in the development of US Navy doctrine on combating the swimmer-sapper issue. Operational research papers undertaken by the RAN Research Laboratory were also provided, as they underpinned the broad doctrine. Many of the measures proposed were adopted as standing operating procedures.

North Vietnamese sappers were assault or shock troops, which in today's parlance would be designated as Special Forces. Naval sapper targets included commercial and military shipping, bridges and piers, and bases near waterways. Between 1962 and 1969 there were some 88 successful attacks against shipping in Vietnamese waters, resulting in some 210 personnel killed and 325 wounded. Only 20 enemy sappers were killed or captured, emphasising the extremely advantageous payoff to the enemy of this type of attack.

The book also includes the contribution made by the small RAN clearance diving team, CDT 3. It operated within Operation Market Time (Task Force 115) and was fully integrated within the US Navy EOD Mobile Unit Pacific. The team was involved in thwarting two swimmer-sapper attacks on shipping in Vung Tau in May 1969 and June 1970. The first incident resulted in the recovery of two modern Soviet BPM-2 limpet mines in mint condition. It also participated in Operation SEALORDS, which resulted in them receiving a Presidential Unit Citation.

As the US Command became increasingly aware of the versatility and positive 'can do' mind-set of the Australian clearance divers, they were regularly employed as the 'immediate response team' to any EOD/diving/salvage incident which was 'outside the square.' Vietnam proved to be the testing ground for the RAN Clearance Diving Branch and it confirmed that the selection and training process was turning out men made of the 'right stuff.'

David Bruhn has produced an excellent and comprehensive book, clearly showing the contribution of the Gator Navy to the overall war effort in Vietnam. As well as providing a reference on the various classes of amphibious ships, the book gives an interesting description of the many amphibious landings conducted, and the role amphibious ships played in support of the brown-water navy, within the larger backdrop of the war.

Commodore Hector Donohue AM RAN (Rtd)