

Viet Cong Sappers Nearly Sink USS *Westchester County*

Sapper action is a special action which requires special effort and special skills to perform.

—Remark by Ho Chi Minh in an address delivered on 19 March 1967
at the Sapper Training School in North Vietnam, located
at the headquarters of the 305th Sapper Group.¹

Photo 1-1



USS *Westchester County* (LST-1167) under way, date and location unknown.
U.S. Navy photo from *All Hands* magazine, September 1973

Few Americans have heard of the *Westchester County* (LST-1167), a 384-foot tank landing ship commissioned on 10 March 1954. Fewer still are aware that aboard her, the United States Navy tragically suffered its greatest loss of life in a single incident as the result of enemy action during the entire Vietnam War.

At 0322 on 1 November 1968, the stillness of the Mekong Delta was shattered by two enormous explosions, which blasted gaping holes in the starboard side of the tank landing ship *Westchester County*—opening the interior of the ship to the muddy waters of the My Tho River. As most of her crew, soldiers and other Riverine Force personnel berthed aboard, slept, Viet Cong swimmer-sappers (frogmen) had evaded Base Interdiction & Defense craft (riverine craft) patrolling as a deterrent to just such an attack, and silently approached the anchored ship. The messenger of the watch had just gone below to wake reliefs for those on duty, when a pair of mines detonated simultaneously. Estimated to contain between 150 and 500 pounds of explosives, the mines were attached amidships to the starboard side of the ship's hull.²

Photo 1-2



USS *Westchester County* (LST-1167) with riverine craft alongside.

Courtesy of Albert Moore, founder and long-serving president of the Mobile Riverine Force Association

The tank landing ship was functioning as an ammunition and supply ship serving with the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force (Task Force 117). On this day, she was attached to Mobile Riverine Group Alfa, and also serving as a temporary home and base to 175 soldiers of the 9th Infantry Division's B Company, 3rd Battalion of the 60th Riverine Infantry, and to the crews of Navy River Assault Division 111. At the time of the attack, "Wesco" (as she was referred to by her crew) was anchored midstream on the My Tho River, in the vicinity of My Tho, forty miles upstream from the seaport of Vung Tau. Clustered in a rough semicircle around her were the self-propelled barracks ship *Benewah* (APB-35), the landing craft repair ship *Askari* (ARL-30), two

large barracks barges, a small salvage vessel, and scores of armored riverine assault craft sporting coats of green paint.³

Photo 1-3



The self-propelled barracks ship USS *Benewah* (APB-35), flagship of the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force (Task Force 117), lies at anchor in waters of the Mekong Delta, with armored troop carriers (ATCs) nearby, November 1967. National Archives photograph #USN 1142271

Moored alongside *Westchester County's* starboard side were three "ammi" (huge aluminum pontoon barges), separated from the ship by a floating 50-foot-long teak log, called a camel, which acted as a fender to protect the side of the ship. Linked together, the three barges functioned as a combination pier, loading dock, and ammunition and gasoline storage depot. Numerous craft (monitors, assault support patrol boats, and armored troop carriers) of River Assault Division 111 were made up to the ammis. Five UH-1B Iroquois ("Seawolf") attack helicopters were staged on Wesco's upper deck. Stored below on her tank deck, were more than 350 tons (about ten truckloads) of high explosives and ammunition.⁴

Typical precautions against enemy attack had been in effect. The 384-foot tank landing ship was darkened, with only anchor lights showing. Forward and aft, 3"/50-caliber rapid-fire guns were loaded, manned by partial crews, and armed lookouts were posted on deck. A

watch team was in place on the bridge and, in the bowels of the ship, engine room personnel stood ready to answer engine commands from the bridge, should *Westchester County* need to get under way. In the distance, muffled thumps could be heard as riverine craft patrolled the anchorage area, periodically dropping concussion grenades to ward off enemy frogmen. Below deck, in the crowded berthing compartments, Navy and Army personnel slept peacefully.⁵

NORTH VIETNAMESE SWIMMER-SAPPERS

Photo 1-4



At a camp in the jungle, Viet Cong swimmer-sappers study a map in preparation for a demolition attack on a bridge in Phuoc Tuy Province, November 1971. The original photograph was captured from the Viet Cong.

Australian War Memorial photograph P01003.021

The team of swimmers that had affixed the explosives to the hull of *Westchester County* were “sappers,” members of the Bo Doi Dac Cong (“soldiers in special forces”), a highly organized, well-trained and well-equipped organization that carried out special operations. The term “sapper” originated from the French word *saper*, a reference to French soldiers who dug narrow trenches, or “saps,” toward an enemy fort to provide a somewhat protected channel for moving men and artillery closer to the fort in preparation for an assault. The term “sapper” currently refers more broadly to combat engineers who carry out a variety of construction and demolition duties. In Vietnam, American troops used the name primarily for North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and

Viet Cong (VC) units that used tactics more akin to those of commandos than to the work of engineers.⁶

Prior to the Tet Offensive in early 1968 (a coordinated series of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacks against targets all across South Vietnam), the sappers in the south were controlled by the Viet Cong and operated independently of the North Vietnamese Army. After the Viet Cong suffered massive casualties during Tet, all sapper operations in South Vietnam were supervised by the 429th Sapper Group, which reported directly to the Sapper High Command, a department in the NVA High Command in Hanoi. Training centers in South Vietnam and Cambodia were run by the 429th Sapper Group, while the centers in North Vietnam and Laos were directed from the NVA High Command. The instruction typically lasted three to eighteen months, depending on whether trainees would be soldiers in regular units or raiders operating outside a formal military structure.⁷

On 27 December 1970, five South Vietnamese Popular Forces platoons and helicopter gunships engaged a platoon of the 126th NVA Naval Sapper Regiment in the First Coastal Zone, which they wiped out, with nineteen killed and one, badly wounded, captured. The dead had empty packs and floatation bladders, indicating that they were returning from a mine emplacement mission. The prisoner revealed that his unit had travelled from the vicinity of Vinh Linh City, North Vietnam, to the Cua Viet River where they placed two 50kg pressure mines on the night of 24 December.⁸

The POW was a nineteen-year-old NVA private first class from Thanh Hoa Province in North Vietnam. He revealed that the 126th Regiment consisted of four companies of 50 to 60 men, each made up of four platoons. His training, conducted in Haiphong, had included two months of swimming instruction, two to three months of demolition training, and a similar period of political indoctrination.⁹

Within the Sapper Group were three distinct types of sapper units. Urban sappers were devoted to intelligence gathering, terrorism, assassination, and special operations in large urban areas such as Saigon and Hue. Field sappers conducted operations against U.S. and South Vietnamese troops, trained other Communist troops as sappers, and provided Communist leadership an elite force for lightning raids. Naval swimmer-sappers were responsible for attacking merchant and naval shipping, bridges, and bases near waterways. Merchant ships delivering munitions and other materials to Vietnamese ports in support of the allied war effort were popular targets, as were ships and barges of the Mobile Riverine Force that berthed large numbers of American soldiers, and lesser numbers of Riverine Force personnel.¹⁰

An attack on a waterborne vessel called for the placement of one or more explosive charges directly onto the hull of the target. The first challenge confronting the swimmers was to arrive at the target covertly. Depending on where the vessel was moored or anchored, the swimmers had to get their explosive charges to the target by swimming from shore or being dropped off by sampan. Once close enough to the target, a two-man swimmer cell normally swam covertly beneath the water's surface using snorkels, each dragging an individual charge or working together to carry a single large charge. The two members normally tied a rope between themselves to facilitate the attack and prevent themselves from becoming separated.¹¹

Approaching the vessel, the pair tried to catch the anchor chain between them using their rope. If successful in snaring the chain, this action secured them against any currents that might propel them away from the ship. The swimmers could then maneuver and place the charge or charges against the hull of the target. The explosive(s) were attached, either magnetically or tied to the hull, and the fuses activated. The latter could be either command detonated or time-delayed, but time-delayed seemed to be the preferred method as it required no additional activity by the swimmers, whose goal was to escape undetected and survive the mission.¹²

SUBSTANTIAL DAMAGE TO TANK LANDING SHIP

Photo 1-5



Clear view of the damage wrought by enemy limpet mines to the hull of USS *Westchester County*, following the removal of the pontoons and the riverine craft that were made up along her starboard side.

Courtesy of Albert Moore

A waxing gibbous moon provided some illumination in an otherwise dark night, however, the full scope of damage to the ship could not be ascertained until daybreak. Dawn's early light revealed a pair of gaping,

10-foot holes, and the ship listing 11-degrees to starboard. Above, on Wesco's main deck, two of the choppers were wrecked beyond repair. The inboard ammi along her starboard side was crumpled, with dozens of damaged light anti-tank rockets, Claymore mines, blocks of C-4 plastic explosive, flares, grenades, and other loose ordnance strewn across its twisted deck.¹³

The forward half of the teakwood camel had been obliterated, and the remaining twenty-five feet driven through the ammi's aluminum hull (as shown in the below photograph) with the splintered remainder scattered over the decks of the pontoon and the ship. The pontoon's guard shack was wrecked, and several assault craft moored to the ammi (not shown) were severely damaged and in danger of sinking.¹⁴

Photo 1-6



Pontoon and guard shack wrecked by two exploding mines attached to *Westchester County's* hull evidence the force that opened her hull, killing and wounding many sailors and soldiers sleeping in adjacent berthing spaces.
Courtesy of Albert Moore

DESPERATE EFFORTS BY CREW TO SAVE SHIP

The mines had been placed between the pontoons and the ship's hull, resulting in the force of the explosions travelling upward, through hull plating and fuel tanks, and into berthing compartments. In an instant, visibility within the ship was reduced to zero as lighting was knocked out, and the air filled with steam and vaporized diesel fuel.¹⁵

As river water flowed into *Westchester County*, she began listing to starboard. General Quarters was sounded, and survivors able to do so, groped in the tangled darkness to reach battle stations or aid wounded

shipmates. The ship's commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. John W. Branin, was thrown from his bunk by the blast. Believing his ship was under rocket attack, he picked himself up off the deck, and quickly made his way to the bridge. Once there, Branin and his executive officer, Lt. Richard Jensen, faced a grim situation. Early reports indicated severe damage amidships and suggested heavy casualties, especially among the senior petty officers—leaving more junior, or untrained personnel, to rapidly carry out critical functions.¹⁶

Compounding these challenges, oil-slick decks made movement around the ship extremely hazardous, and communications between repair parties and damage control central (directing repair actions) was almost negligible. Of great concern, two-thirds of the tank deck, which ran nearly the entire length of the ship, was being used for ammunition storage. More than 10,000 rounds of 105mm and 155mm howitzer ammunition were stacked alongside pallets of 20mm cannon ammunition, boxes of C-4 plastic explosive, Claymore mines, white phosphorous ammunition, and cases of flares and pyrotechnics. Loose and damaged ammunition now lay scattered about the deck, blanketed by a mist of fuel oil. With just one spark, *Westchester County* and the other vessels of the Mobile Riverine Force anchored nearby could be obliterated, and the sailors and soldiers aboard them killed by an explosion of unimaginable magnitude.¹⁷

Branin's immediate problem was saving his ship from sinking. As tons of water continued flowing in through her ruptured hull plating, and she heeled over, ever farther, he thought for an instant that she would roll completely over. Fortunately, the *Westchester County* had a ballasting system which allowed her (like other LSTs) to "ballast down" off an assault beach, rest on the bottom in shallow water, and open her bow doors to discharge her craft. This was done by filling internal tanks provided for that purpose with water. When ready to do so, it was easy to pump out the water, float clear, and stand out to sea.¹⁸

Importantly, the ship had water in her ballast tanks, and Branin knew that if water could be pumped out of her forward starboard tanks, this action could reverse, or nearly offset, the effects of the water flooding into the ship. Miraculously, there was still electrical power to the pumps and, with the damage control officer providing precise instructions to Petty Officer Second Class Rick Russell, the ship slowly started rolling back to a more even keel.¹⁹

With many of the senior petty officers aboard killed or incapacitated, junior petty officers, seamen, and firemen stepped up, taking charge at battle stations suddenly undermanned and without leaders. The 22-year-old Russell, finding himself alone in the forward

pumping station, had contacted the bridge via sound-powered phones, reported in, and stood by for orders.²⁰

CORPSMAN'S HEROIC ACTIONS SAVES LIVES

Amidships on the second deck, in the senior petty officers' berthing compartment, Hospital Corpsman First Class John S. Sullivan had, like many others, been flung from his rack (bed). Knocked unconscious by the blast, he found himself, upon coming to, lying half on the deck and half in a gaping hole, and pulled himself away from the opening. With the General Quarters alarm sounding, Sullivan skirted the hole and began crawling through the wreckage toward the sound of voices.²¹

In this and other adjacent crowded sleeping areas, the blasts had rolled the deck beneath the occupants upward and back, leaving only a cramped crawl space between the deck and overhead, which was now jammed with twisted metal and mangled bodies. Below, in the Army berthing spaces, men, bedding, weapons, ammunition, and personal gear were hurled about, just before the waters of the My Tho began flooding these areas via breeches in the hull.²²

Sullivan located two injured shipmates, sandwiched between the remains of their bunks and tons of tangled steel, pinned in the wreckage. Both had multiple injuries and Sullivan, injured himself, treated them by touch in the darkness. After providing first aid as best he could, Sullivan pried the men free and, with the help of an impromptu rescue team, evacuated them to a higher deck. Of the eleven men who slept in the First-Class Petty Officers' berthing area, three had been in other parts of the ship on watch. Five of the those present had been killed outright. Sullivan and his two shipmates were the only sailors to emerge alive from the compartment after the explosions.²³

Sullivan headed for the bridge, with leg bleeding, to find out where else he was needed. As soon as it became evident the ship was not under sustained attack, Branin released non-vital men from their topside battle stations to assist with rescue and casualty evacuation. However, until blowers could clear the lower decks of vaporized fuel, the use of cutting torches was out of the question. Chain falls, pry bars, come-alongs (hand-operated winches), and screw jacks were used to gain access to, and free men trapped in the wreckage. Sealed battle lanterns and portable lighting equipment safe to use, provided illumination. On the tank deck, fire party personnel stood by with hoses at the ready, while sailors gingerly collected damaged ammunition, gently setting it aside until it could be disposed of.²⁴

While a corpsman from River Assault Division 111 tended to the wounded in sick bay, Sullivan returned to the devastated berthing areas.

Two men discovered still alive in one of the partially flooded lower compartments, were pinned in their racks against the overhead by a huge sheet of steel. Directly below them, sunlight and river water entered the ship. Sullivan made his way into the wreckage, rendered first aid and provided encouragement, until the metal could be pried back far enough to pull the wounded sailors free. A 13.3-foot Boston whaler (“skimmer”) then proceeded into the wrecked and flooded compartment through a hole in the ship’s hull to take them to safety.²⁵

MAKESHIFT REPAIRS

The day after the mining attack—which killed 25 men and wounded 23 others aboard *Westchester County*—the entire Mobile Riverine Force moved from My Tho to Dong Tam. Located on the north bank of the Mekong River, Dong Tam was the home of the Army’s 9th Division and its Navy counterpart. A few days after arrival there, Branin beached the Wesco on a river bank near Dong Tam, in order to expose enough of the hull at low tide to fully assess the damage to his ship and to plan temporary repairs.²⁶

With the help of a repair division from the landing craft repair ship *Askari*, and a team from Naval Support Activity, Dong Tam, Wesco’s crew worked around-the-clock for two weeks, building a cofferdam to keep the river at bay, and cutting away mangled steel in preparation for temporary hull repairs. Finding that necessary structural steel plating and I-beams were unavailable locally through Navy sources, Branin decided to follow a time-honored Navy tradition.²⁷

That night, a party sent ashore to find and “liberate” the needed materials found at an Army engineer compound near Dong Tam: a stockpile of portable bridging equipment, including assorted I-beams and plenty of steel plating. Once available at the ship site, within hours the “commandeered” beams and plating were cut to the proper size and welded into place to serve as hull patches.²⁸

VOYAGE TO YOKOSUKA

On 14 November, with the help of a large Navy tug, the *Westchester County* came off the bank, and proceeded downriver to the South China Sea and a 2,500-mile voyage home to Yokosuka, Japan, for dry-docking and permanent repairs. Her passage home was not an easy one. Rough seas generated by a typhoon she was unable to avoid, caused cracks and ruptures in the temporary repairs, and she began taking on water. By the time the LST entered Tokyo Bay on 25 November, flooding had overwhelmed pumps capable of dewatering 3,200 gallons per minute. Nevertheless, the intrepid ship and crew made it safely into port.²⁹

The following day, *Westchester County* entered dry dock at the U.S. Naval Ship Repair facility in Yokosuka where she remained until 5 February 1969.³⁰

RETURN TO COMBAT DUTY

Upon completion of refresher training and upkeep, *Westchester County* got under way on 10 March 1969 for the Vietnam coast. She continued to make regular deployments to Vietnam until she was decommissioned on 30 November 1973. During her service to the nation and the Navy, she earned a host of unit and service awards:

- Combat Action Ribbon (3)
- Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon (3)
- Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon (2)
- National Defense Service Medal
- Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (3)
- Vietnam Service Medal (16)
- Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation (27)
- Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with 1960s device³¹

AWARDS FOR VALOR

More than thirty-six personal awards and commendations were awarded to the ship's crew for its performance during and immediately after the 1 November attack. Lt. Comdr. John W. Branin received the Bronze Star Medal. Hospital Corpsman First Class John S. Sullivan received the Silver Star Medal and the Purple Heart Medal.³²

LEST WE FORGET



The Republic of Vietnam suffered two killed in the mining attack; a South Vietnamese sailor, and Le von Ba, a “Tiger Scout” interpreter. Comprising the remaining twenty-three killed were seventeen members of ship’s company, one member of River Assault Division 111, and five members of the U.S. Army’s 9th Infantry Division. The body of Engineman Third Class Harry J. Kenney was never recovered.

USS Westchester County (17)

SA Jackie C. Carter	SK1 Aristoteles D. Ibanez
SK1 Richard C. Cartwright	YN1 Jerry S. Leonard
QM2 Chester D. Dale	RM3 Joseph A. Miller
RD3 Keith W. Duffy	RM1 Rodney W. Peters
SN Timothy C. Dunning	YN3 Cary F. Rundle
PN1 David G. Fell	RM3 Reinhard J. Schnurrer
ETN2 Thomas G. Funke	QM2 Thomas H. Smith
RM3 Gerald E. Hamm	CS1 Anthony R. Torcivia
SN Floyd W. Houghtaling	

River Assault Squadron 11, Division 111 (1)

EN3 Harry J. Kenney

B Company, 3rd Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division (5)

SP4 Leslie V. Bowman	SP4 Paul D. Jose
SP4 Wilfredo Cintron-Mendez	SGT Dennis K. O’Connor ³³
PFC Ernest F. Cooke ³³	