
1 Most Dangerous Waters

We know what has to be done and we'll do it.

Statement by BM1 John O. Hood, Boat Captain of MSB-45, to a journalist following the loss of his fifty-seven foot minesweeping boat to a Viet Cong command-detonated mine in the Long Tau channel. The explosion had killed one member of the six-man enlisted crew and wounded four of the five survivors.

On 9 October 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded the first Vietnam War-era Presidential Unit Citation to a unit of the U.S. Navy or Marine Corps (see Appendix A). This citation, which signifies extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy, is the highest award that a military command may receive, the unit equivalent, in degree of heroism, to the Navy Cross for an individual. The recipient was not, as one might imagine, an aviation element flying air strikes over North Vietnam or a group of special warfare experts embroiled in the war ashore. Instead it went to previously unheralded Mine Squadron Eleven Detachment Alfa, comprised of thirteen fifty-seven foot minesweeping boats based at Nha Be, at the strategically-important junction of the Soi Rap River and the Long Tau Channel, the main waterways between the port of Saigon and the South China Sea. This small base, located just seven miles south of Saigon, would become a major combat and logistic hub during the course of the conflict in Southeast Asia. During the period cited, from 1 June 1966 to 18 February 1967, the boats and their crews daily faced great danger from river mines and Viet Cong ambush while sweeping clear of hostile ordnance the thirty-mile segment of the Long Tau from Nha Be through the infamous Rung Sat Special Zone to the sea. Known from before the French colonization of Vietnam as a refuge for the pirates and bandits that preyed upon river and coastal traffic, the area later became



Minesweeping boats moored alongside the large covered lighter *YFNB-9* at Nha Be, Republic of Vietnam. (Courtesy of Roger Campbell)

one of the strongholds of the Binh Xuyen gangsters (sometimes referred to as the “Vietnamese Mafia”). American servicemen commonly referred to the Rung Sat as the Forest of Assassins, because the Vietnamese word *rung* can be translated as “forest, jungle or woods” and *sat* as “assassin, killer or murderer.” In *A Soldier Reports*, General William C. Westmoreland, the American commander of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam, explains his rationale for ordering minesweeping of the waterway between the South China Sea and Saigon, as well as the Army’s efforts to break the Viet Cong (VC) grip on the surrounding area:

I was long concerned that the VC might sink a large vessel along the forty-mile course of the Saigon River to block the vital shipping channel between Saigon and the sea. The main channel ran through fifty square miles of mangrove swamps and thousands of tributary waterways, a region known as the Rung Sat, which was an ideal base from which the VC could operate against shipping. One of the most savage pieces of terrain in the world, the Rung Sat has almost no ground that is not subject to inundation from a six-foot tidal variation. The houses of the few villages in the region are built on stilts.

...To break the VC hold on the region, I later shifted a battalion of the

1st Infantry Division to the Rung Sat where the men encountered some of the most unusual and trying conditions ever faced by American soldiers. Because the men spent hours and even days patrolling in water up to the waist, companies had to be rotated frequently to forestall foot and skin diseases. The men slept at night on air mattresses and at particularly high tides might awaken to find themselves afloat. Wooden platforms built above the high-tide mark served as helicopter pads. It was a strange war within a strange war, but it cut one of the main VC infiltration routes into the Saigon region and disrupted the enemy's organization. Even though the VC later hit an occasional ship with rocket, machine guns, or mortar fire, they never succeeded in blocking the shipping channel to Saigon.¹

Photo 1-3



MSB-47 returning to Nha Be after a weary and dangerous day of sweeping on the Long Tau Shipping Channel. (Courtesy of Matthew Zimmer)

armed with rockets, 57-mm and 75-mm recoilless rifles, and automatic weapons. A former MSB crewman recalls witnessing two merchant vessels damaged by enemy mines during his initial duty aboard a minesweeping boat:

We were the first group from Mine Squadron 11 to go to Nha Be. I was nineteen years old and the first trip down the Long Tau was scary ... I watched the *Eastern Mariner* sink at Nha Be after being blown up by the VC. Our boat, *MSB-16*, was one of the first on scene at the SS *Baton Rouge Victory* [locale] after it was mined and beached.

The damage to the *Eastern Mariner* on 26 May 1966, a twelve-by-ten-foot hole in the starboard quarter of the vessel, was caused by a time-delay mine attached by Viet Cong sapper-swimmers to the merchant ship while

Daily sweeping for mines was both tedious and dangerous, particularly in the meandering restricted passages that cut through the Rung Sat Swamp. Here, boat crews, as well as Navy and merchant ships in passage, regularly faced death from mines commanded by observers hidden in heavy foliage along the banks or from ambush by Viet Cong

it lay anchored at Nha Be. Three months later, on 23 August, Viet Cong operating from bases in the Rung Sat mined, for the first time, a vessel proceeding upriver from Vung Tau to Saigon. Command-fired from the bank as the ship passed within the mine's kill radius, the explosion beneath the *Baton Rouge Victory* opened a sixteen-by-forty-five-foot hole in her port hull, killing seven crewmen, all engineers. With water pouring in, the master put the vessel aground on the south bank in order to prevent it from sinking and to keep the shipping channel open.²

The events depicted in what follows occurred during a single day of the nine-month period for which Detachment Alfa was cited for extraordinary heroism. In the early morning of 15 February 1967, Minesweeping Boat 49 backed clear of her berth in a nest of small craft at Nha Be, twisted about and headed downriver to the junction of the Soi Rap River and the Long Tau Channel, taking the left fork into the channel. Following astern of her was *MSB-51*. The fifty-seven foot wooden craft, with their four-foot drafts and twin screws, were ideal for navigating shallow inland waters not accessible to larger ocean or coastal minesweepers. However, while able to maneuver easily up- or downstream in torturous waterways, MSBs could make only a very modest eight knots while sweeping, even when propelled by current. The boats, never intended by their designer to be fast, had been rendered even slower by increased weight from their modifications for Vietnam service, which included the installation of fiberglass sheathing over their hulls and ceramic armor over the front and sides of the pilothouse. Although the craft had but limited ability to avoid or disengage from a fight, they were heavily armed. For example, the *MSB-34* was fitted forward with one .30-caliber machine gun on both the port and starboard bows, two M60 machine guns on the open bridge, and additional small arms (four M16s and two M79 grenade launchers) inside the pilothouse. Aft of the pilothouse were two Honeywell 40-mm grenade launchers, two .50-caliber machine guns, and, further aft in an elevated gun tub, a third 50-caliber machine gun.³

After entering the channel, the two boats streamed chain-drag sweep gear astern as they proceeded downstream. Comprised of a length of stout chain to which metal spikes were welded every few links, the chain was designed, when dragged across the river bottom, to sever electrical wires used by the Viet Cong to command-detonate mines. On some occasions, only a single boat swept while the other one in company carried a SEAL team to a drop point somewhere along the waterway.⁴

At 0655, as the boats made a starboard turn around the first large bend in the Long Tau some five miles downstream from Nha Be, they sailed into a Viet Cong ambush (see Map 1-1). The lead boat, *MSB-49*, was engulfed by crisscrossed 75-mm recoilless rifle and heavy automatic weapons fire from well-fortified enemy positions on both banks. Three rifle rounds pierced her port side, one setting the fuel tanks ablaze. The *MSB-51*, as well as river patrol boats (PBRs) in the vicinity, responded with counter-fire. (The latter craft were a military adaptation of a 31-foot civilian fiberglass boat, equipped with one twin .50-caliber machine gun and a second single .50-caliber machine gun with a Mark 18 grenade launcher. Although lightly armed, PBRs were faster and more nimble than minesweeping boats and were used to guard their flanks.) With the *MSB-49* rapidly taking on water, Boatswain's Mate First Class L. R. Rooks steered his boat toward a hostile bank to keep from sinking. Under heavy fire, BM1 John Hood brought the *MSB-51* in close behind her and, with the assistance of a PBR, pushed the besieged craft aground and moored it to trees along the bank.

Map 1-1



The crews of minesweeping boats regularly faced death from deadly mines and Viet Cong ambush while daily sweeping the Long Tau from Nha Be through the Rung Sat Special Zone to the South China Sea.

While PBRs helped keep the enemy pinned down, Hood's crew evacuated the wounded from the burning boat and stripped it of armament. For his actions that day, Hood later received the Silver Star Medal.⁵

The Navy craft continued to exchange fire with the enemy until 0710, when help arrived from Nha Be in the form of a Navy "Seawolf" helicopter fire team from HC-1 Detachment Twenty-seven. This unit, charged to protect shipping on the Long Tau as well as patrol the Rung Sat, flew ex-Army UH-1Bs in the Mekong River Delta. (In addition to Seawolves, the Navy pilots flying Army helicopters were also referred to as

Photo 1-4



MSB-49 beached in the Long Tau Channel following a Viet Cong ambush on 15 February 1967. Source: United States Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Supplement (February 1967).

recoilless rifle casings, a claymore mine, and two dead Viet Cong. (In addition to employing command-detonated river mines regularly against minesweeping boats on the Long Tau, the Viet Cong sometimes used claymores, anti-personnel land mines traditionally used against troops, to target topside crewmembers.) Two landing craft towed the *MSB-49* back to Nha Be where later, unsalvageable due to topside battle damage and water intrusion into equipment and machinery spaces below-decks, she was dragged up on the beach and given a Viking funeral. *MSB-51* returned to the river later that same day to continue her work with a new partner, Minesweeping Boat 32.⁶

February 15th, which would be marked by ambush after ambush on the river, was later termed by MSB sailors the “Bad Day at Black Rock,” after the 1955 Hollywood film of the same name starring Spencer Tracy. In late morning, *MSB-45*, operating in company with *MSB-22* fifteen miles southeast of Nha Be, was lost to a controlled-mine near the west bank of the Long Tau, sinking almost immediately after a violent explosion. Fortunately the 22 boat was able to recover five crewmen, four of them wounded, from the water. (Many MSB sailors left their boots unlaced, the more quickly to shed them in order to swim or float should they find themselves in the river.) A helicopter evacuated the injured to Nha Be and a search began for the missing crewman, Damage Controlman Third Class Gary C. Paddock, whose body was found three days later. Divers subsequently stripped the unsalvageable boat, which was lying on the bottom, and destroyed the hulk with explosives.⁷

“NavCav,” short for “naval cavalry.”) The Huey helicopter, while making firing runs along enemy positions that stretched for a half-mile along the channel, sustained hits from heavy ground fire but remained aloft. Forty minutes later, a fixed-wing aircraft strike announced the arrival of a four-company South Vietnamese Regional Force to sweep the area. The militiamen found ten 75-mm

Photo 1-5



Boatswain's Mate First Class John O. Hood, USN, being awarded the Silver Star Medal for heroism. (Courtesy of Roger Campbell)

At 1428 that same day, *MSB-51* again came under attack. Hit in the stack and sweep winch by heavy weapons fire, she, along with *MSB-32*, and their two PBR escorts, reversed course and headed north. Two miles upstream, they were ambushed again. Four more PBRs joined the action, accompanied by helicopter and fixed-wing airstrikes on the enemy, in what one participant would later describe as “one hell of a shootout.”⁸

The total losses suffered by Detachment Alfa during four separate actions that day were: destruction of *MSB-45*, heavy damage to *49* (which, being unsalvageable, was subsequently destroyed), and damage to *51*, with two sailors killed and sixteen wounded. Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Viet-

nam, in a message sent the following day, applauded the contributions of the “B boat” sailors:

The courageous action, bulldog tenacity and personal heroism that the men of Detachment Alfa have demonstrated under fire is in keeping with the highest traditions of the Navy. It is singularly significant that in spite of yesterday's efforts by the Viet Cong, the river remains open and unblocked. Your resolution in continuing maximum coverage of the Long Tau with available assets is highly gratifying.

To the gallant officers and men of Mine Squadron Eleven, Detachment Alfa, I express my gratitude for your thoroughly outstanding performance of duty and tireless efforts.⁹

For the men at Nha Be, the events of that day served as a catalyst to unify their small organization and generate even greater pride in their craft and the dangerous mission to which they'd been assigned. Previously, some members had been heard to utter, “We're just (expletive) B boat sailors,” to express, perhaps, frustration resulting from minimal support and

acclaim for the risks they faced day-after-day. No more. The 106 enlisted men knew what they had to do, and continued to do it with added pride and a greater realization of their importance to the larger war effort. (A listing of the minesweeping boats and river patrol craft, and boat captains, which then comprised the detachment, is provided in Appendix B.)¹⁰

Between 20 September 1966 and 15 February 1967, Mine Squadron Eleven Detachment Alfa suffered eleven members killed in action and two classified as missing in action (see Appendix C). In 1968, Detachment Alfa became Mine Division 112, and a new sister division, Mine Division 113, was formed. Between 16 April 1969 and 26 February 1970, this small combined mine force, comprised almost entirely of enlisted, lost another four sailors. Collectively, the two divisions sustained almost all the casualties suffered onboard mine warfare vessels in Vietnam. While relatively few “sweep” sailors worked inshore in South Vietnam, at any given time hundreds were serving offshore aboard ocean and coastal minesweepers engaged in Operation MARKET TIME. This operation involved the boarding and searching of thousands of junks, sampans and fishing boats in an effort to prevent or reduce seaborne North Vietnamese infiltration of men, munitions, and supplies into South Vietnam. Sweep sailors also comprised the crews of the minesweeping launches carried aboard USS *Epping Forest* (MCS-7) and, later, USS *Ozark* (MCS-2). These mine countermeasures support ships served as flagship of Commander, Mine Flotilla One, based in Sasebo, Japan. The launches swept harbors and inlets too shallow for minesweepers.¹¹

The history of the largest vessels is covered in *Wooden Ships and Iron Men: The U.S. Navy's Ocean Minesweepers, 1953-1994*. Volume Two in the series, *Wooden Ships and Iron Men: The U.S. Navy's Coastal and Motor Minesweepers, 1941-1953*, is a study of World War II and Korean War-era vessels. This work is devoted to the companions of the post-Korean War ocean minesweepers, the smaller coastal and inshore minesweepers and the even smaller wooden- or steel-hulled minecraft that plied the inland waterways of South Vietnam.¹¹