

Ambush on the Co Chien River

Ship and crew ready to haul cargo or fight and not necessarily in that order.

- Statement in a damage report submitted by USS *Brule* AKL-28 (the former Army freight-supply ship *FS-370*), after sustaining rocket hits in August 1968 during one of her normal supply runs in inland waters of South Vietnam. Despite suffering extensive damage to her superstructure and cabling, she suppressed the enemy fire and proceeded on schedule.¹

Photo 1-1



Painting by Richard DeRosset of the light cargo ship USS *Brule* (AKL-28) under attack by rocket and automatic weapons fire coming from both banks of the Co Chien River. She was ambushed by the Viet Cong on 24 August 1968 while proceeding downriver.

On 24 August 1968, as the dawn of another hot and humid day broke in Vietnam, USS *Brule* lay at anchor in the Co Chien River off Vinh Long, with various units of the River Patrol Force. Her sea detail was

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set at 0715, and the light cargo ship was soon under way, maneuvering on various courses and speeds to conform to the channels in the river. On the bridge, her commanding officer, Lt. William Hewitt, USN, “had the conn” (personal control of the movement of the ship via rudder and engine commands). Hewitt was a “Mustang,” a former chief signalman who had earned a commission as a Deck, Limited Duty Officer. Propelled by two 500hp GM 6-278A diesel engines, *Brule* had a modest top speed of 13 knots. Her tasking that day was to resupply the tank landing ship USS *Garrett County* (LST-786), located down the river. The water’s surface was smooth that morning.¹

Photo 1-2



USS *Brule* (AKL-28) at anchor in South Vietnamese waters, 27 September 1966.
National Archives photograph #USN 1118482

Garrett County (LST-786) was one of four World War II-vintage tank landing ships serving as mobile support bases for river patrol boats (PBRs) and “Seawolf” helicopter gunships in support of friendly forces ashore and along the rivers of the Mekong Delta. She, *Harnett County* (LST-821), *Hunterdon County* (LST-838), and *Jennings County* (LST-846) were a part of Task Force 116 (River Patrol Force), engaged in Operation GAME WARDEN. This code word referred to using 31-foot PBRs, assisted by armed helicopters, to limit the enemy’s use of the larger waterways in South Vietnam. This was necessary to interdict supplies for the Viet Cong flowing into the Mekong Delta from Cambodia.

Helicopter Attack Squadron (Light) Three, Detachment 4, and River Patrol Section 523 were then operating from the *Garrett County*.²

Photo 1-3



USS *Garrett County* (LST-786) on the Co Chien River, Mekong Delta, in June 1968, while providing support for five PBRs and two UH-1Bs of Operation GAME WARDEN. National Archives photograph #K-51442

PEDIGREE OF *BRULE* AND HER SISTER SHIPS

Brule and sister ship *Mark* were 176-foot, former unnamed Army freight supply ships (the *FS-370* and *FS-214*). In World War II, the U.S. Army—requiring vast numbers of small ships to support its ground forces in the Southwest Pacific, and in other theaters of war—had contracted for the construction of hundreds of freight and freight-supply ships. Following the war, between 1947 and 1966, the Navy acquired forty-five of the rugged steel, war-tested freighters. The vessels were originally commissioned Miscellaneous Auxiliary Ships, and a few years later were reclassified, on 1 July 1950, as Light Cargo Ships. Nine of these ships received unit awards for combat duty in the Korean or Vietnam War, or for service as Environmental Research (“intelligence gathering”) ships.³

The most well-known is the USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2), captured by North Korean naval forces on 23 January 1968. She remains today a

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commissioned United States Navy Ship, despite being held by the Communist country. The former freight-supply ship most viewed by the public was the light cargo ship USS *Hewell* (AKL-14). She garnered seven battle stars during the Korean War, but is best known as the fictitious Navy cargo ship *Reluctant* depicted in the 1955 American comedy-drama film *Mr. Roberts*. Filmed in Hawaii, the movie starred Henry Fonda, James Cagney, William Powell, and Jack Lemon. The film was based on a novel and screenplay by Thomas Heegan, who served as communications officer aboard the ammunitions ship USS *Virgo* (AE-30) during World War II (discussed in Chapter 18).⁴

Other freight-supply ships also had interesting post-World War II service. Following her naval stint as USS *Deal* (AKL-2), the former unnamed *FS-263*, operated in 1966 off the coast of England as a pirate radio station transmitting “Swinging Radio England” (SRE), initially as the motor vessel MV *Olga Patricia* and, after a name change, as the *Laissez Faire*. As depicted in the 2009 motion picture *Pirate Radio*, from aboard the ex-*Deal* and other ships located in international waters off England’s east coast, rebellious disc jockeys were broadcasting rock’ n’ roll music which, although spreading like wildfire in the United States, was all but banished from the British airwaves. The BBC owned all but one commercial TV network, and the broadcasting corporation favored a bland fare of news and information, light entertainments and children’s programs. More recently, the former freight-supply and “radio pirate” ship was employed as the fishing vessel *Earl J. Conrad Jr.*, out of Reedville, Virginia.⁵

USS *Mark* (AKL-12) and *Brule* (AKL-28) garnered four combat action ribbons, five Navy Unit Commendations, and thirty-two other unit awards between them for Vietnam War service. A summary of the awards received by them and seven other former freight-supply ships for Korean War service and beyond, follows.

Korean War					
	<i>ex FS-263</i> USS <i>Deal</i>	<i>ex FS-275</i> USS <i>Esterio</i>	<i>ex FS-361</i> USS <i>Ryer</i>	<i>ex FS-385</i> USS <i>Sharps</i>	<i>ex FS-263</i> USS <i>Hewell</i>
Battle Stars	7	7	6	3	7

Vietnam War		
	<i>ex FS-370</i> USS <i>Brule</i>	<i>ex FS-214</i> USS <i>Mark</i>
Combat Action Ribbons	2	2
Navy Unit Commendation	2	3
Vietnam Service Medals	11	14
Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citations, Gallantry	3	4

Intelligence Gathering Missions

	ex <i>FS-345</i> USS <i>Banner</i>	ex <i>FS-344</i> USS <i>Pueblo</i>
Combat Action Ribbon		1
Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal	1	1

Following their acquisition by the Navy, the *Brule* and *Mark* were placed in commission as AKLs, and later from 1956 to 1965 placed “out of commission in service” and used to shuttle supplies and passengers between Subic Bay and U.S. Naval Station, Sangley Point, located on a peninsula jutting into Manila Bay, about eight miles southwest of the city of Manila. *Brule* and *Mark* were re-commissioned on 1 September, and 1 October 1965, respectively, and sent to Vietnam. Attached to Service Group Three, they worked directly for U.S. Naval Support Activity, Saigon, distributing vital cargo and supplies up and down shallow waterways in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.⁶

Brule averaged three trips a month from Nha Be/Saigon to ports such as Vung Tau, Cat Lo, My Tho, Dong Tam, Chau Doc, Binh Thuy, An Thoi and other operational bases on the rivers and coast of Vietnam. She transported general cargo, ammunition and POL products: on an average run, up to 225 tons of cargo, 38,000 gallons of water and 20,000 gallons of fuel oil. Of modest size and appearance, she and her small crew of 43 enlisted and 5 officers provided vital support to the “Brown Water Navy” (the name ascribed to the delta force) while fulfilling her valiant motto: “SERVICE – OUR MISSION FOR FREEDOM”⁷

RIVER NARROWS POSE DANGER

Brule, and other ships and craft that plied the rivers, knew the popular ambush sites used by the enemy. These were typically where a waterway narrowed, such as between an island and a river bank, or other locations when it was necessary for a vessel to pass sufficiently close to a bank to come under attack. Making passage along the center of a wide tributary was preferred, as it avoided these situations.

At 0747 on 24 August, only nine minutes after getting under way from Vinh Long, *Brule*'s commanding officer secured the sea detail and set General Quarters. This action proved prudent, because at 0814 the light cargo ship began taking rocket and automatic weapons fire from the starboard bank of the Co Chien River, as she was abreast a brick factory. *Brule* was steering a course down the centerline of the river, or nearly so. One minute later, rocket and small arms fire erupted from the port bank. Her gun crews were on “top form” that morning—the starboard battery quickly opened fire, followed by the port battery, and suppressed the hostile fire at 0816.⁸

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Photo 1-4



USS *Brule* (AKL-28) on the Bassac River, South Vietnam, in September 1968.
Courtesy of Albert Moore

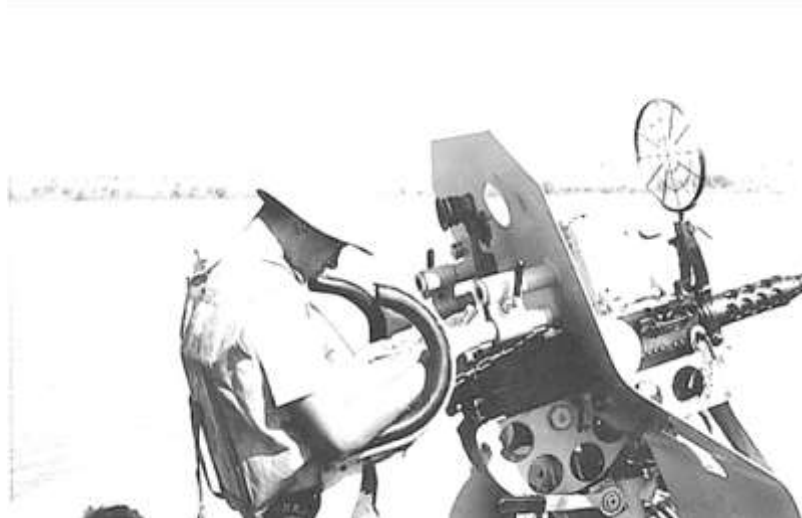
All mounts then ceased fire and gun crews reloaded. The *Brule's* armament consisted of two .50-caliber machine guns on her fo'c'sle, and two larger 20mm guns above the wheelhouse—one of each type on the port and starboard sides of the ship. Warrant Officer (WO1) Thomas L. Young, USN, at his gun control station above the wheelhouse, had directed the actions of the two batteries. Observing rocket and automatic-weapons fire coming from the vicinity of big, domed ovens used for baking bricks, he had ordered the starboard battery into action. (The weapons themselves, and enemy wielding them, were shielded from his view.) Knowing that when an attack originated from one side of a ship, one from the other often followed, he shifted his field of vision to *Brule's* portside, noted weapons fire from the left bank, and ordered the port battery into action as well.⁹

Brule suffered material damage, identified below, but no personnel casualties, owing at least in part to her rapid counterfire:

- Rocket hit, starboard side at frame 77, one foot above the waterline, destroying freon lines in No. 2 cargo hold and severing power cables forward
- Rocket hit, starboard side forward of the pilot house, destroying an educator (pump) hose and freon bottles, and shattering two pilot house portholes

- Rocket hit, port bridge wing, damaging lighting in the forward berthing compartment
- Automatic weapons fire damaged the 1-MC announcing system, CO2 bottles, and lube oil drums, and created numerous small holes throughout the ship¹⁰

Photo 1-5



One of USS *Brule*'s two Browning .50-caliber heavy machine guns.
Courtesy of Craig Reynolds, and the Mobile Riverine Force Association

Four of the seven rockets fired at *Brule* missed the ship. Although busy directing the gun action, Young did witness the second to last, and final misses, both fired from the starboard bank. The first of these two rockets disappeared at a 45-degree angle into the sky; the last one hit forward of the ship and skipped across the water.¹¹

Lieutenant Hewitt ordered General Quarters secured at 0958 and set the sea detail. Fifteen minutes later, his ship moored port side to the *Garrett County*. After resupplying her, *Brule* cleared the tank landing ship's side, and began transit up the Co Chien and My Tho Rivers to Sa Dec. Arriving at her destination late afternoon, she anchored in the My Tho off the river patrol boat base, ready to continue her duties as one of the units of the Service Force in Vietnam.¹²

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Photo 1-6



Crewmembers of the USS *Mark* (AKL-12), sistership of USS *Brule*, offloading supplies for Navy units operating in the Mekong Delta. Department of Defense photograph K-52148