



War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965–1968 by John Darrell Sherwood.

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The Vietnam War is a challenging subject for military historians. Unlike the Civil War or World War II, it featured innumerable guerrilla and counterinsurgency actions rather than set-piece battles or decisive campaigns. Small units and individuals fought engagements that often went unreported or underreported. While full military records are available for major campaigns, smaller actions must often be approached through personal accounts in the form of memoirs or oral history interviews; such materials have more commonly been produced by journalists and popular historians than by academics.¹ Most histories of the war, scholarly or otherwise, focus on the land war fought by the Army and Marine Corps supported by air power. The Navy's role is less well understood, especially the diverse actions of small vessels operating along the thousands of miles of Vietnamese coastline, rivers, and canals. In *War in the Shallows*, John Darrell Sherwood (US Naval Historical Center) meticulously examines naval warfare in Vietnam by integrating traditional sources with personal accounts that add depth and detail to the larger story.

With twenty years of experience as a military historian,² Sherwood is ideally qualified to carry out this project. He conducted many oral history interviews and scoured relevant secondary sources, journalistic accounts, and official records of all five service branches, since the coastal and riverine units in Vietnam included Coast Guard elements and personnel from the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force.

The book's six chapters proceed chronologically, but shift between various aspects of the naval efforts and types of units involved. Chapter 1 concerns the South Vietnamese navy. A poor stepchild of the army, it suffered from its leaders' ties with the regime of President Ngô Đình Diệm, who was deposed in 1963. Lacking resources and trained personnel, it could not interdict waterborne North Vietnamese shipments of supplies and troops to the Viet Cong. As in the land war, US involvement began with advisers and special forces and expanded to include regular units in 1965, as it became apparent that the South Vietnamese could not win the war on their own.

Sherwood then turns to US efforts to prevent seaborne shipping from North Vietnam in 1965–66 (chap. 2), which succeeded thanks to superior reconnaissance technology, and to control of river traffic in 1966–67 (chap. 3), which was less successful due to the sheer number of waterways and hazards of operations by small, highly vulnerable craft. He discusses, too, the highly effective Mobile Riverine Force (chap. 4), which combined naval elements with a brigade of the US Army's

1. James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2014) is a good example of the conventional approach. Andrew Wiest, *The Boys of '67: Charlie Company's War in Vietnam* (NY: Osprey, 2012), while written by an academic using both oral history and military records, is geared toward a general audience.

2. His earlier work includes *Officers in Flight Suits: The Story of American Air Force Fighter Pilots in the Korean War* (NY: NYU Pr, 1996), *Fast Movers: Jet Pilots and the Vietnam Experience* (NY: Free Pr, 2000), and *Afterburner: Naval Aviators and the Vietnam War* (NY: NYU Pr, 2004).

9th Division in operations in the Mekong Delta and along the coastline in 1967 (chap. 5). These operations forced the North Vietnamese to seek alternative land routes through Laos and Cambodia. The author concludes by looking at the role of coastal and riverine units during the Tet Offensive of 1968 (chap. 6), spending most of his time on the efforts of the Mobile Riverine Force and other Navy and Coast Guard units in defeating and crippling the Viet Cong forces in the Delta region.

Particularly noteworthy throughout is Sherwood's frank assignment of credit and blame where they are due. In closing chapter 2, for instance, he details the Arnheiter Affair (80–87), named for Marcus Aurelius Arnheiter, the commander of a radar picket ship, the USS *Vance*. Removed from duty as unfit for command, Arnheiter used the press and his connections in the Navy to fight back in a case that took over two years to resolve. In his account, Sherwood draws on official records, personal testimony, and the research of noted journalist Neil Sheehan, all of which supported the Navy's case, despite Sheehan's reputation as a critic of the military. While some of Arnheiter's actions as a commander are certainly relevant to Sherwood's topic, he could easily have ignored much of this material, but instead chose to tackle the question directly, a tactic typical of the entire book.

Sherwood's treatment of the fighting at Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta during the Tet Offensive (292–300) is a great strength of his book. Having described the town and noted its early role in supporting Viet Cong resistance to the Saigon government, he characterizes the opening attack on it as a success: the American advisers retained only the area around their small, ill-fortified compound. Nevertheless, they held out till help arrived in the form of air support and gunfire from small river patrol boats (PBRs). Sherwood tells the story of that first part of the battle through oral history interviews with men who served on the PBRs, interweaving contextual material from military records.

The author then turns to the postmortem, specifically to journalist Peter Arnett's quotation of an anonymous officer's quip that "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it," a line that has ever since captured the futility of the American effort in Vietnam. Sherwood stresses that much of the town had burned simply because the Viet Cong chose to fight in a place where the nature of the weapons used by both sides and the construction of the buildings made fires inevitable. He then turns to the account of one of the men he has followed in his narrative. Gunner's Mate Paul Cagle

recalled that after the battle there were so many bodies in the streets that the Vietnamese resorted to throwing them in the water to dispose of them. Lack of potable water forced many local civilians to drink contaminated river water, which caused illnesses and additional deaths. Cagle and his shipmates were so short of water that they often drank syrup from fruit cocktail cans. "*Hunterdon County* [an LST³ supporting the PBRs] was trying to purify water as best they [*sic*] could, but purification chemicals in it would still burn our eyes and mouth." To help prevent a cholera outbreak, Cagle and other PBR crew members lashed the Vietnamese bodies into bundles and pulled them out to the Ham Luong [River], hoping the tide would carry them out to the South China Sea. "This is what happened to some of the dead people. The Army also buried a bunch of them. People have pictures of these bundles but no one will show them to anyone." (299–300)

Cagle's commentary transcends questions of blame in assessing the human costs of war, the sufferings of those who fought it, and how they dealt with them (major concerns throughout the book).

3. Landing Ship, Tank.

John Sherwood's thorough and careful treatment of his subject fills a substantial hole in the current scholarship.⁴ *War in the Shallows* is an excellent example of the discerning use oral history material to enhance and move beyond after-action reports and other standard military documents.

4. Since his account stops in 1968, the author does not address later American efforts to control the inland waterways or the Vietnamization of the naval war, which he suggests would require separate books in their own right.