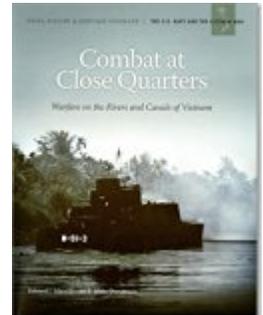


Edward J. Marolda, R. Blake Dunnavent. *Combat at Close Quarters: Warfare on the Rivers and Canals of Vietnam*. Washington, DC: Naval Historical Foundation, 2015. 82 pp. \$21.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-945274-73-5.



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Edward J. Marolda and R. Blake Dunnavent's *Combat at Close Quarters: Warfare on the Rivers and Canals of Vietnam* provides a concise introduction to the operational history of America's "brown water" Navy in Vietnam. Published by the Naval History and Heritage Command as the fifth installment of its The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War series, this slim and richly illustrated volume focuses primarily on the evolving mission of US and allied riverine forces between 1965 and 1973.

While both Marolda and Dunnavent have published monographs of greater depth in the field of naval history, *Combat at Close Quarters* may be most valuable in its accessibility to an audience beyond specialists.[1] The book reflects the authors' scholarly expertise, but at just seventy-nine pages of text, its coverage is at times cursory. The authors include a bibliography to orient readers who wish to delve deeper. Although lack of citation might rankle readers eager to trace particular sources, the prose provides sufficient context to situate the authors' claims. Most of the book's glossy pages display one or more high-quality

color images depicting the people and events discussed in the text, while eight interspersed "sidebars" of one to two pages present technical sketches or narrative vignettes describing notable equipment, operations, and personnel. These elements of style and design characterize the larger U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War series, and contribute to its value for general audiences.

Combat at Close Quarters consists of a brief introduction and five roughly chronological chapters. Chapter 1 suggests the strategic importance of Vietnam's coastal and inland waterways in the French conduct of the First Indochina War. With economic and material support from the United States, French riverine forces targeted Viet Minh infiltration networks in the waterways that their commander, Paul Philippe Ortoli, described as "the principal means of access to the life of the country" (p. 5). Although French riverine forces often prevailed in open combat, they were beset by waterborne mining until the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu forced their country's withdrawal in 1954. Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the Re-

public of Vietnam Navy (VNN) under US military advisement between 1954 and 1964. American aid expanded the size of the VNN, yet consistent problems of poor morale, high desertion rates, a politically divided officer corps, and inadequate logistical support undermined the service's effectiveness. The authors conclude that the "generally mediocre operational performance" of the VNN prompted the direct military intervention of US naval forces by 1965 (p. 15).

Chapters 3 and 4 provide more comprehensive coverage of US riverine operations conducted between 1965 and the departure of American combat troops in 1973, devoting particular attention to Operation Market Time, Operation Game Warden, and the Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy (SEALORDS). Intelligence reports in 1964 and 1965 converged with the practical experience of American advisors to underscore the imperative of eliminating Viet Cong infiltration networks on South Vietnam's coastal and inland waterways. To this end, US commanders in March 1965 implemented a naval blockade of South Vietnam's coastline designated Operation Market Time. When Hanoi responded by making increased use of the Ho Chi Minh trail and other inland infiltration routes, the navy established a River Patrol Force to conduct interdiction on the major rivers of the Mekong Delta in Operation Game Warden. The SEALORDS campaign, devised by Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. and his staff in 1968, pushed deeper into the delta's tributaries, canals, and swamps to maintain offensive pressure on enemy forces. A brief concluding chapter discusses preparations for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Vietnam under the auspices of the Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV) program: the naval component of the Nixon administration's Vietnamization policy.

Marolda and Dunnavent demonstrate the strategic importance of riverine warfare in the larger conduct of the Vietnam War. Beyond obstructing enemy infiltration networks and maintaining al-

lied supply routes, the authors claim that control of South Vietnam's waterways "helped the allies expand the Saigon government's political and military presence ..., mount the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, and frustrate the enemy's drive toward Saigon in 1972" (p. 79). The authors also incorporate the testimony of naval personnel, content from military citations for heroism, and anecdotes from the existing literature to indicate how the operational strategies they describe proceeded on the ground. A lack of standard riverine warfare doctrine, for instance, often compelled small unit leaders to "throw away the rulebook" and develop innovative tactics that reflected what worked in the field (p. 48). One drawback of the study's emphasis on operational strategy and combat performance, however, is a lack of attention to the limits of conventional military superiority in counterinsurgency warfare. The authors' conclusion that "the river warfare forces of the United States and its South Vietnamese ally did not—could not—ensure victory in a war decided by massed ground combat divisions" understates the political complications that undermined the larger American mission in Vietnam (p. 79). Yet the limits of the authors' analysis are understandable given the format of their study, which succeeds in providing a succinct and engaging introduction to US riverine warfare in Vietnam.

Note

[1]. Marolda is former Acting Director of Naval History and Senior Historian of the Naval Historical Center (redesignated in 2008 as the Naval History and Heritage Command). His publications include Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965*, The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1986); and Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1994). Dunnavent is an associate professor of history at Louisiana State University

in Shreveport. His publications include R. Blake Dunnavent, *Brown Water Warfare: The U.S. Navy in Riverine Warfare and the Emergence of a Tactical Doctrine, 1775-1970* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

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