



Salvatore R. Mercogliano. *Fourth Arm of Defense: Sealift and Maritime Logistics in the Vietnam War.* The U.S. Navy and Vietnam War Series. Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2017. Illustrations. 78 pp. free, pdf, ISBN 978-0-945274-97-1.

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Published on H-War (August, 2022)

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World commerce moves on the waves. Roughly 90 percent of all cargo moved between nations does so via oceans and rivers. Military transportation follows the same calculus, the consistent speed and capacity of sealift far outpacing any ground vehicle, airlift platform, or future craft for delivery to battle via space. In concrete terms, one ship driven by Military Sealift Command (the US Navy's transportation arm) carries the equivalent load of two hundred C-17 airlift aircraft of the United States Air Force. In *The Fourth Arm of Defense: Sealift and Maritime Logistics in the Vietnam War*, Salvatore R. Mercogliano records the massive logistics movement by sea to support the conflict in Vietnam and reminds the reader that sealift is the backbone of any large deployment of US troops. The strategic failure of Vietnam and the geopolitical and cultural consequences for the US military rightly overshadow the operational and tactical success on the battlefield of which logistics played a critical role. For example, at Khe Sanh, US Marines in forward outposts had ice cream delivered to their positions, while their North Vietnamese adversaries went without food, and sometimes water. Rarely in the war did any US combatant lack water, food, arms, or ammunition, guaranteeing tactical and operational success, including the near obliteration of the North Viet-

namese Army during the Tet Offensive in 1968. The US won all battles only to lose the war.

Mercogliano helps to shine a light on the system of transportation over the water that underpinned and fed those tactical successes, allowing the reader to understand the Vietnam War more fully. In this quick read of seventy-five pages, the author excels in bringing the scale and scope of the war to life. Between 1965 and 1973, 6,800 ships of massive size and use, from petroleum tankers, to cargo ships carrying refrigerated box cars and passenger ships that carried more than 179,000 soldiers, supported the effort in Vietnam. To carry out this gargantuan operation, the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS, the precursor to today's Military Sealift Command) relied heavily on the merchant marine—aptly named the "Fourth Estate" by Franklin Delano Roosevelt after their efforts during the Second World War. These mariners helped command and drive the ships across the ocean into the dangerous waters near Saigon. There were numerous interdiction efforts by the VietCong guerilla force in the South, resulting in the loss of 12 ships and 11 tugs and more than 26 merchant seamen. As with any military force, the merchant marine adapted to the threat of enemy action, improving navigation procedures to avoid enemy activity, and enlisted military as-

sets, from SEALs to helicopters, to aid in mine prevention and intelligence gathering. In addition to the merchant marine, the MSTS relied heavily on commercial shippers to support the transportation of goods and combatants and a bevy of civilian managers to help let contracts and command and control the shipping into theater. The only minor complaint about this analysis is the author does not list the primary source locations for future scholars to examine other areas for academic study. Given that the Naval History and Heritage Command is the publisher and the intent of the work was not a large volume, this omission is understandable.

Beyond the tale of the tape, Mercogliano does an admirable job of inserting small stories about individual crews and their heroic efforts to supply Vietnam. These small anecdotes help to illustrate the author's broader point about the war: the efforts of MSTS during the war were hard fought, hard won, and a massive success. Most poignant for me was the sad story of the *SS Badger State*, in which poor understanding of how to transport munitions (and how harmless bombs are without fuses) cost the lives of twenty-six crew members who abandoned ship into 56 degree water. Due to this incident, MSTS revamped the procedures for carrying munitions and doubtless prevented future accidents.

Given the current thinking and planning for possible conflict in the Pacific, this work deserves broad readership. Any military planner on Indo-Pacific Command staff, US Transportation Command, or Military Sealift Command, or involved in logistics should read this book to relearn lessons of the past. Foremost, the relationship with commercial industry will be critical to any future operations across the vast distances. Given the stumble of the international supply chain across the Pacific Ocean due the COVID-19 pandemic, what will be the impact if commercial shippers cannot replicate the support they gave during Vietnam? How prepared is the US military to put

merchant mariners, and possibly civilian shipping, in harm's way? Given the large amount of resources the US Navy dedicated to protect the last forty-five miles of water between Saigon and the ocean—explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) experts, picket boats, and constant water patrols—how much support will the US military have to use to protect future lines of communication? There are many more scenarios that MSTS contended with in Vietnam which the US and its allies will confront in any future fight. This book would be the ideal start for wargaming and planning to use the past to help shape the future. For readers of a more academic bent, this is a solid secondary source with the overall facts and figures of the logistics of the Vietnam War. Further analysis, tracing the specific efforts to move the logistics from port to battle, would help to shed more light on logistics in the war—a topic ripe for further analysis and scholarship.

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Citation: Jobie Turner. Review of Mercogliano, Salvatore R. *Fourth Arm of Defense: Sealift and Maritime Logistics in the Vietnam War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2022.

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