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OPERATION SEALORD – 1968



MARS Special Operations Group

8 OCTOBER 1968

U.S. forces in Vietnam launched Operation Sealords, an attack on North Vietnamese supply lines and base areas. **Conceived by Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr.**, it was a joint operation between U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. SEALORD was intended to disrupt North Vietnamese supply lines in and around the Mekong Delta. As a two-year operation, by 1971 all aspects of SEALORD had been turned over to the South Vietnam Navy.

As U.S. forces prepared the South Vietnamese military to assume complete responsibility for the war, they also worked to keep pressure on the enemy. In fact, from 1968 to 1971, the allies exploited the Communists' staggering battlefield losses during the Tet attacks by pushing the enemy's large main force units out to the border areas, extending the government's presence into Viet Cong strongholds, and consolidating control over population centers.

The Navy in particular spearheaded a drive in the Mekong Delta to isolate and destroy the weakened Communist forces. The SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy) program was a determined effort by U.S. Navy, South Vietnamese Navy, and allied ground forces to cut enemy supply lines from Cambodia and disrupt operations at his base areas deep in the delta.

It was developed by **Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., appointed COMNAVFORV 🤖 Commander US Naval Forces Vietnam) in September 1968**. When Admiral Zumwalt launched SEALORDS in October 1968 with the blessing of the new COMUSMACV 🤖Commander of US Military Assistance Command Vietnam), General Creighton Abrams, allied naval forces in South Vietnam were at peak strength.

The U.S. Navy's Coastal Surveillance Force operated 81 Swift boats, 24 Coast Guard WPBs, and 39 other vessels. The River Patrol Force deployed 258 patrol and minesweeping boats; the 3,700-man Riverine Assault Force counted 184 monitors, transports, and other armored craft; and Helicopter Attack Squadron Light (HAL) 3 flew 25 armed helicopters.

This air component was soon augmented by the 15 fixed-wing OV-10 Bronco aircraft of Attack Squadron Light (VAL) 4, activated in April 1969. The lethal Bronco flown by the "Black Ponies" of VAL-4 carried 8 to 16 5-inch Zuni rockets, 19 2.75-inch rockets, 4 M-60 machine guns, and a 20-millimeter cannon. In addition, five SEAL platoons supported operations in the delta.

Complementing the American naval contingent were the Vietnamese Navy's 655 ships, assault craft, patrol boats, and other vessels. To focus the allied effort on the SEALORDS campaign, COMNAVFORV appointed his deputy the operational commander, or "First SEALORD," of the newly activated Task Force 194. Although continuing to function, the Game Warden, Market Time, and Riverine Assault Force operations were scaled down and their personnel and material resources increasingly devoted to SEALORDS.

Task Force 115 PCFs mounted lightning raids into enemy-held coastal waterways and took over patrol responsibility for the delta's larger rivers. This freed the PBRs for operations along the previously uncontested smaller rivers and canals. These intrusions into former Viet Cong bastions were possible only with the on-call support of naval aircraft and the heavily armed riverine assault craft. In the first phase of the SEALORDS campaign allied forces established patrol "barriers," often using electronic sensor devices, along the waterways paralleling the Cambodian border.

In early November 1968, PBRs and riverine assault craft opened two canals between the Gulf of Siam at Rach Gia and the Bassac River at Long Xuyen. South Vietnamese paramilitary ground troops helped naval patrol units secure the transportation routes in

this operational area, soon named Search Turn. Later in the month, Swift boats, PBRs, riverine assault craft, and Vietnamese naval vessels penetrated the Giang Thanh-Vinh Te canal system and established patrols along the waterway from Ha Tien on the gulf to Chau Doc on the upper Bassac.

As a symbol of the Vietnamese contribution to the combined effort, the allied command changed the name of this operation from Foul Deck to Tran Hung Dao I. Then in December U.S. naval forces pushed up the Vam Co Dong and Vam Co Tay Rivers west of Saigon, against heavy enemy opposition, to cut infiltration routes from the “Parrot’s Beak” area of Cambodia. The Giant Slingshot operation, so named for the configuration of the two rivers, severely hampered Communist resupply in the region near the capital and in the Plain of Reeds.

Completing the first phase of the SEALORDS program, in January 1969 PBRs, assault support patrol boats (ASPB), and other river craft established patrol sectors along canals westward from the Vam Co Tay to the Mekong River in Operation Barrier Reef. Thus, by early 1969 a patrolled waterway interdiction barrier extended almost uninterrupted from Tay Ninh northwest of Saigon to the Gulf of Siam.

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