



Operation Game Warden (TF 116)



The USS Hunterdon County (LST 838) was a member of a River Patrol Force operating in Vietnam under the designation of Task Force 116. It was established on December 18, 1965 and given the code name Game Warden. The Game Wardens of Vietnam were assigned the responsibility of helping the South Vietnamese river forces in denying the Viet Cong the use of the inland waterways of South Vietnam.



During the Vietnam War, there were over 50 LSTs serving in direct support of the Mobile Riverine Forces. The LSTs of Vietnam earned 360 battle stars, 19 Presidential Unit Citations, 45 Navy Unit Citations, and 39 Meritorious Unit Citations.

The original Game Warden TF 116 consisted of the following units:

- 120 specially designed River Patrol Boats (PBRs)
- 20 Landing Craft (LCVPs)
- 8 UH-1B Huey Helicopters
- 4 specially modified Landing Ship Tank (LSTs)

By mid 1968 just prior to the Tet Offensive, the compliment of PBRs was increased to 250. The patrol areas were also expanded to include areas of I Corps and even into Cambodia under Operation Sealords in fall 1968.



These four LSTs were specially configured to be mobile PBR bases. The four original Operation Game Warden LSTs were USS Garrett County (LST-786), USS Harnett County (LST-821), USS Hunterdon County (LST-838), and USS Jennings County (LST-846). I was stationed aboard the USS Hunterdon County from October 1967 through April 1969.

The special modifications to these LSTs included:

- A day or night operations capable landing pad equipped for refueling and reloading two UH-1C Huey helicopters



- Four special boat booms for mooring up to 16 PBR boats alongside the ship.



- A cargo boom designed for lifting PBR boats out of the water and into the ship's interior repair shops



- A PBR machine/repair shop capable of doing engine, pump, body work, and other repairs on PBR boats.



- Specially designed water purification plant so that muddy river water could be purified in enough quantity to support a large crew.
- Updated radio, navigational and electronic equipment

With their special gear, these LSTs provided important supply and maintenance facilities for the PBRs and other small river boats, services which were unavailable at shore bases. During the modifications, these LSTs had so much equipment stuffed into their hulls that living conditions for crews were seriously overcrowded.

The main areas of operation for these four LSTs were the Bassac, Co Chien, and Ham Luong rivers (See Map on Page 1). There was a rotation set up where three Game Warden units were always on station while the fourth was out of Vietnam for R&R and repairs. Usually the repairs were in the Philippines and lasted for one to two months at a time (That's how I had enough time to meet, court, and marry my wife).

These flat-bottomed LSTs could navigate upstream via the rivers of the Mekong delta from the entrances in the Tonkin Gulf all the way into Cambodia. Although these LSTs made it possible to project a mobile support base for PBR boats and helicopters deep inland, putting such large slow moving ships like this on these narrow waterways surrounded by dense tropical forests presented some risks. On September 12, 1968, the Hunterdon County was ambushed near Ben Tre. She was hit by rocket and recoilless rifle fire from shore and suffered extensive structural damage. Two crewmen were killed and another twenty-five were wounded.

The PBR boats (Patrol Boat, River) became known as the mainstay of river patrol

operations. When the Navy decided to commit itself to river patrol operations in Vietnam, it did not have a readily available small fast patrol craft, nor did it have time to design one of its own. The Navy decided to find a commercially available hull and modify it for combat. They needed a small, light boat with high speed, shallow draft, waterjet propulsion system, and heavy firepower. A contract for 120 PBRs was awarded to United Boat



Builders of Bellingham, Washington at a cost of \$75,000 each.

Here are some specs for these PBR boats:

- 31 foot long fiberglass hull
- Capable of speeds over 28 knots
- The Mark I powered by GM 220 horsepower diesel truck engine providing 2800 RPM direct drive for a Jacuzzi water jet propulsion pump. The Mark II was slightly larger with 2 more powerful engines and 2 Jacuzzi pumps.



- A Raytheon 19900/W radar unit tuned for night operations
- Armament consisted of at least:
 - 1 twin .50 caliber machine gun turret in the bow
 - 1 single .50 caliber machine gun in the stern
 - 1 M-60 machine gun
 - 1 Mark 18 40mm grenade launcher
- Additional armament fitted to some PBRs after delivery
 - 90mm recoilless rifles
 - 60mm mortars
 - Flamethrowers
 - 20mm cannons

Normally the crew of a PBR was four men -- A first class or chief petty officer, a gunner's mate, an engineman, and a seaman. Each man was cross-trained in each others job. PBRs normally went out on two-boat teams and patrolled the various rivers and canals day and night searching various sampans and junks for weapons and supplies. The Viet Cong were very good at concealing such material in even the smallest of boats. Only by thoroughly checking every boat could the flow of weapons and supplies be stopped. The PBR crews along with the rest of the brown water Game Warden fleet carried out this mission so effectively that movement of supplies to the Viet Cong via these waterways was severely curtailed.