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John Darrell Sherwood. *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam, 1965-1968.* Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, 2015. 443 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945274-76-6.

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On October 20, 2017, Rear Admiral (RADM) Richard K. Fontaine (USN-RET), was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Throughout a lifetime of service, RADM Fontaine gained the respect of numerous crews for his leadership, concern for his sailors' welfare, and high demand for their competency at sea. Fontaine's seamanship not only gained his crews' trust, but also saved lives. This was evident in a case where he guided a ship under his command, Destroyer Escort Radar *USS Hissem* (DER-400), back to safety south of New Zealand, after it suffered a cracked keel while on station in rough seas in 1963.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the recent "avoidable" collisions, endured between the *USS McCain* (DDG-56) and the *USS Fitzgerald* (DDG-62) with commercial vessels, taking place under Fontaine's watch. The lack of seamanship, preparation, navigation, and situational awareness, cited as components of these accidents, demonstrate the perils and complexity of naval operations. The cost of these recent events entailed the death of seventeen sailors, numerous reliefs in command, and a reevaluation of the 7th Fleet's operating posture in the Pacific. In the United States' naval history, these challenges are not new. They confronted the navy and its sister service, the US Coast Guard, significantly during the Vietnam War. Tasked with developing the largest blockade, riverine, and interdiction effort since the United States Civil War, the adaptation of the United States' naval forces included staggering achievement in Southeast Asia during the 1960s. This adaptation is the subject of a fascinating, informative, and well-written book by John Darrell Sherwood in *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy*

Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965-1968.

The past and present converge through the individuals and operations of the US Navy. The namesake of the *USS Fitzgerald*, which collided with a container ship near Japan, was Lieutenant William C. Fitzgerald. This junior officer posthumously earned the Navy Cross while serving as a senior advisor in Coastal Group 16, south of Danang at the mouth of the Tra Khuc River. On August 7, 1967, 1,200-1,500 Viet Cong overran the junk base location of Coastal Group 16, just south of My Lai, an area dominated by the Viet Cong at the time. Sherwood's account of Fitzgerald's actions, and those of this Coastal Group, are remarkable. In the case of the *USS McCain*, it was named for Senator John McCain's father and grandfather, and stemmed from service during Vietnam and World War II, respectively.

The importance of coastline operations during the Vietnam War is well known among naval historians. Numerous records, oral interviews, documentation of multiple operations, task force organizational structures, and after-action reviews demonstrate an extensive historical record. What the record lacked included an up-to-date and wide-ranging examination of the cumulative story of the US Navy and US Coast Guard during the Vietnam War. Sherwood's *War in the Shallows* fills this much-needed gap on the era and he comprehensively elucidate this subject with a compelling narrative.

The operating structure of *War in the Shallows* centers on five main periods of the United States' involvement in Vietnam. The first of these time frames includes the advisory period, roughly 1950-65, and it is the focus of

chapter 1. Chapters 2 through 5 provide in-depth analysis of three task forces between 1965 and 1968. These chapters recount the unique task and purpose of each force and how they contributed to the overall effort of the United States as it sought to assist the Republic of Vietnam. Chapter 2, for example, focuses on coastal interdiction efforts for which Task Force (TF) 115, also known as Operation Market Time, held responsibility. Operation Game Warden, examined in chapter 3, is assessed through the effort and composition of Task Force 116, the River Patrol Force.

The Mobile Riverine Force (MRF) composed a third task force, TF 117. It is the central subject of chapter 4. In this role, TF 117 provided a combined, joint effort with US Army forces, notably the 9th Division in the Mekong Delta. Last, chapter 6 provides a comprehensive look at the US Navy's role during the Tet Offensive in early 1968. The book concludes with a summary of how Vietnamization, directed by President Richard Nixon, affected the navy's role as it transferred ships to the Vietnamese navy in an effort leading toward eventual withdrawal from Vietnam.

Riverine warfare and interdiction along the extensive Vietnamese coast was clearly a challenge. As Sherwood observes, the Vietnam War "represented the first time since the Civil War that large numbers of sailors experienced riverine warfare in small boats—a combat experience more akin to that of an infantry soldier than a sailor on a large oceangoing surface combatant" (p. 323). Additionally, a key component of this form of warfare was the leadership demanded of petty officers and junior officers—US Navy lieutenants and lieutenants junior grade (j.g.)—in particular. An admirable quality of Sherwood's analysis, throughout the work, is his incorporation of individuals' stories and how their performances between 1965 and 1968 fit into the bigger picture of the navy and coast guard during the Vietnam War. Vietnamese voices from the Vietnamese navy are also included. This positively deepens the overall picture offered readers and it humanizes and adds vitality to Sherwood's assessment.

Sherwood's work, to be certain, does not corner the market of literature on the US Navy during the Vietnam War. However, it does stand out due to its recent analysis of the historical record and is further distinguished by its comprehensive examination of the period. Additionally, Sherwood's effort complements other material on the "brown water" navy. For example, Sherwood adds an overarching narrative to contextualize Thomas Cut-

ler's edited collection, *The U.S. Naval Institute on Vietnam: Coastal and Riverine Warfare* (2016) which provides readers with articles written on the subject between 1954 and 1982. A different work, Jason Scheffer's short monograph on the US Navy's adaptation during the Vietnam, *The Rise and Fall of the Brown Water Navy: Changes in US Navy Riverine Warfare Capabilities* (2014), adds a dimension of richness to Sherwood's effort, and neither detracts from the other. It is worth pointing out, still, that *War in the Shallows* appears to pull previous literature on the subject together to provide a bigger picture.

Additionally, Sherwood's demonstrated strengths as a historian of operations in South Vietnam include his highly detailed account of shortcomings in logistics, personnel, training, and readiness among the Vietnam Navy (VNN). Importantly, Sherwood also points out where US Navy personnel fell short in terms of comprehending Vietnamese culture and the administrative obstacles impeding progress among the VNN in its coastal, riverine, and sea forces. One weak link in this otherwise impressive charting of problems includes Sherwood's lack of analysis as to why the VNN and its array of coastal, seagoing, and river forces consistently maintained a position of weakness. Greater critique, even if relatively brief, of the broader political problems of the Vietnam War may have helped contextualize these problems further.

The primary component of this weakness did not include lack of patriotism but rather the systemic failure of a corrupt government led by President Ngo Dinh Diem and subsequent leadership in the Republic of Vietnam. This, all too often, extended all the way down to the average sailors' and junior officers' supervisors. The United States' problem with this entailed it taking on not only the cost, but also the burden of literally operating the ships necessary to complete operations along the coast, in the rivers, and through interdiction. The "doing it for them" effort of the US Navy created additional problems of dependency in terms of morale, operational planning, as well as cost. Notably, it revealed the incapacity of a sustainable government in South Vietnam. This contributed to a perceived and real lack of legitimacy in the South Vietnamese Republic of Vietnam as a competent government.

On this general point, Sherwood acknowledges this overarching weakness in the VNN, and its extension to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) is indicated as well. However, Sherwood does not provide a political critique of the war in Vietnam in a broader context. This is not altogether a problem, due to the miles

of books on shelves already devoted to the matter. Still, a more explicit analysis of how corruption prevented an adequate Vietnamese navy from establishing itself would have provided greater depth to Sherwood's analysis. A typical example of problems associated with corruption is provided in detail by the author, but such issues are not connected to the bigger political picture: "Crews were not paid a living wage, which lowered morale and encouraged desertion. 'It has been my experience,' wrote Commander Aaron A. Levine, 'that the average naval officer's wife is required to take on work to support the family and enlisted personnel are in even worse shape.' (VNN Officer) Do Kiem's wife, Thom Thi Le, worked as a telegraph clerk for Shell Oil for much of his VNN career to help pay the bills and, even with a second income, things were tight. 'VNN salaries were not high enough to meet the basic needs of officers and their families,' explained Do Kiem. Later in the war, some officers engaged in black market activities to supplement their meager wages" (p. 20).

This anecdote reveals how insufficient resources for day-to-day living entailed moving off a government-administrated economy by the very officers and men seeking to preserve the government for which they fought. This is not a condemnation of these men, but rather a critique of a system which failed to adequately provide for its people, particularly one where high-level corruption was widely known. Such a situation is hardly capable of sustaining a counterinsurgency, let alone enabling the development of a competent navy. Building, let alone maintaining a capable navy, is a formidable task requiring vigilance and massive financial commitment. As the collisions of the USS *McCain* and *Fitzgerald* recently demonstrated, this is a current problem for even the 7th Fleet of the US Navy. The critique here is that these low-level problems of corruption cumulatively contributed to the deficiency of the government of South Vietnam, which complicated, if not defeated, its efforts against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam based in Hanoi.

More extensive historical background as to how the French navy developed and operated its naval assault divisions (*Dinassault*) during the French-Indochina War may have added historical depth to Sherwood's account of riverine warfare in Vietnam. Sherwood does devote approximately five pages to the French efforts, but more on how the combined navy/infantry effort operated could have reinforced Sherwood's excellent chapter on the early years of the US advisory period. Importantly, the success of the *Dinassault* provides a precedent the

United States may still benefit from studying at length. Sherwood appears well positioned to build on *War in the Shallows* with, perhaps, more work on the French period. A final critique is insufficient analysis of environmental factors in the Mekong Delta.

As recounted in *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (2012) by Daniel Biggs, such challenges included deposits of silt—*dos d'âne*, best translated as "speed bump" or "hump back." These challenges plague navy operations in littoral zones as a natural "Anti-Access/Area Denial" (A2/AD) device. Overall, the major role of the environment in Vietnam's history, including the sandbars noted above along with the water hyacinth endemic to the Mekong Delta, is critical. Out of fairness, Sherwood makes an effort to detail how sailors fought to adjust propulsion systems and literally clean out clumps of water hyacinth on many occasions. More explicit analysis of the overall environmental challenges operating in the Mekong Delta would have strengthened Sherwood's project. The environment, obviously, will always challenge a "brown water" navy, regardless of the flag it bears. Most importantly, in terms of changing climate, these are challenges that will unfortunately grow dramatically in the years to come.

Overall, Sherwood's excellent work is best directed at an audience familiar with nautical terminology and seagoing platforms. Landlubbers may struggle with the acronym-filled and abbreviation-heavy writing in *War in the Shallows*. Although clearly spelled out when they first appear, they remained a challenge to keep track of, and readers may find themselves consistently turning to the comprehensive "Acronyms and Abbreviations" list—six pages in length—located at the back of the book. Out of fairness, these issues are really matters for the reader to adapt to rather than the fault of the author, or an editorial issue. This kind of history demands the details which means some reasonable work on the reader's part: in other words, the book includes beaches, but it is not beach reading! Despite these points, *War in the Shallows* provides an outstanding, comprehensive examination of an important period of the United States' naval history.

Sherwood's deft blending of personal stories of sailors, both in the navy and coast guard, with his detailed account of operations that demanded adaptation from the navy makes for compelling reading. A key contribution of Sherwood's work is how the navy and coast guards' story during the Vietnam War resonates today and how his work provides a useful case of applied history for the present. While the Vietnam War

required a massive coastal and river force, “littoral combat, coastal surveillance and interdiction, and riverine operations have all occurred in more recent maritime operations and will probably continue in the future” (p. 324). Navy leadership, particularly junior officers seeking to achieve a high level of competency, may positively benefit from Sherwood’s outstanding scholarship. It is clear to this reader that the US Navy’s leaders, such as Rear Admiral Richard K. Fontaine—only recently buried at Arlington after a lifetime of dedication to the United States—would expect and demand nothing less from, and for, his sailors and his navy.

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