

OPERATION MARKET TIME

In 1965, a U.S. Army helicopter pilot on a routine patrol off the central coastline of South Vietnam discovered a North Vietnamese supply ship expertly camouflaged as an island in a harbor. The supply ship had been discreetly rearming enemy forces under the eyes of allied troops in the area. This pilot had observed this small, inconspicuous island daily; however, it did not draw closer attention until it appeared to move slowly from one bank of the harbor to the other. This discovery pointed out a definite need for tighter coastal security.

Along the rugged coastline of South Vietnam are more than 60,000 junks and sampans, each potentially smuggling much needed arms, men, and supplies into the Viet Cong ashore. An estimated 180 fishing junks sixty feet in length could easily meet the requirements necessary for one day's fighting by the enemy in the south.

The U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard along with the Republic of Vietnam Navy created Task Force 115, a coastal surveillance force specially designed to interdict infiltration of men, weapons, and supplies into South Vietnam by way of the sea. Operating under the code name "Market Time", this unique allied organization integrates sea, air, and shorebased units forming barriers off the coast of South Vietnam.

Homebased in Cam Ranh Bay, the Commander of Task Force 115 and his staff direct the operation of securing more than 50,000 square miles of coastal waters between the DMZ and the Cambodian border in the Gulf of Thailand.

Dividing the coastline into nine major patrol areas, Operation Market Time effectively blockades attempts to infiltrate arms and men into South Vietnam. U.S. Coast Guard WHEC's, U.S. Navy DER's, LST's, MSO's, PGM's comprise an offshore barrier, patrolling fifteen to twenty miles off the coast. These units also provide logistics support for the inshore barrier units which are USCG WPB's or 82-footers and USN PCF's or swift boats. U.S. Navy aircraft constantly patrol providing an expansive and rapid surveillance platform.

To accomplish the mission of Operation Market Time, units board and search over half a million junks and sampans a year checking identification cards and looking for contraband cargo destined for the enemy.

In addition to capturing thousands of detainees and tons of illegal cargo, Market Time forces have uncovered and thwarted nine major infiltration attempts, including the capture and destruction of six heavily laden North Vietnamese trawlers, each carrying enough cargo to completely rearm a Viet Cong regiment.

Market Time units provide naval gunfire support for allied troops ashore in conjunction with their normal barrier patrols. A pre-planned or urgent "call for fire" may divert a Market Time unit from their routine patrol to assist ground troops in an offensive or destroy known enemy locations.

Operation Market Time's contribution and significance to the allied effort in South Vietnam perhaps was best expressed by General William Westmoreland upon leaving as the U.S. Commander of American Forces in South Vietnam:

"Market Time forces are a major element of my overall strategy without which we could not succeed. Market Time forces have successfully blocked intrusion by sea, forcing the enemy to use the long tortuous Ho Chi Minh Trail, thus affecting significantly his ability to properly sustain his forces in the South."

