

Subject: Article for News letter : PTF: Naval Special Warfare's First Combatant Craft's Operational History

The First dedicated Naval Special Warfare Combatant Craft was the PTF (Patrol Torpedo Fast). Its role in the Vietnam war has been shrouded in classified operations and only just declassified in the 1990s. The Boats development was also a product of political and changing military doctrine. Both must be mentioned before getting into the PTF and their operations.

1961 was the year that saw President John F. Kennedy direct the Armed Services to develop "Counter-Insurgency " forces to meet the hostile irregular forces in the hot spots of the world. Vietnam in 1961 the CIA was supporting the South Vietnamese Govt. in a covert war against North Vietnam's aggression. Their Maritime Operations at the time were being carried out by S.Vietnam's 1st Observation Group inserting and extracting agents from Junk fishing boats. North Vietnam siding with Communist countries built up a formidable coastal force using Soviet Block combatant craft.

President Kennedy's mandate gave Birth to the US Navy SEALs in 1962 who's role was to have a Sea, Air, Land capability. The Navy could provide the seaborne raiders with air, surface, and submarine assets, but was lacking was a armed, high speed shallow draft boat that could operate in a hostile coastal environment. To meet the needs of the SEALs the Navy looking for such a craft..A key figure in this quest was NSW legend Captain Phil Bucklew who's exploits in WWII won him two Navy Crosses and a Silver Star. and Capt Bucklew during the war knew and made use of PT Boats and in Korea. Capt. Bucklew Commanding Officer of NSW in the Pacific (NOSG) made his view known uptake chain of command.

The development of the PTF program began with two aging postwar experimental PT Boats numbered 810 and 811. They identified as interim PTFs as a quick solution for NSW they were acquired modernized and designated PTF -1 and 2 on Dec 1962 and Crews training for the craft began 1963 from volunteers from the Fleet. These early PTFs were Avgas driven engines and they had the nick name of "the Gassers". However there was a demand for more PTFs to meet Operational Projections and the Navy began looking for ready designs in combatant craft that could match the small Soviet Block Combatant Craft imported all over the world. The USN had no such boats and it would take years to design and produce them. So the search led them to Norway to the Tjed class Torpedo Boat which would meet the needs of NSW. The chief obstacle of buying the foreign boats was political..a legal obstacle of the Buy American Act and would require Presidential Authorization to bypass it. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who were active in Vietnam, learning of the PTFs requested them for Vietnam operations in 1963. President Kennedy, a WWII PT Boat Commander authorized the buy of foreign PTFs. So the politics of procurement was overcome by geo-political events.

The PTFs of Naval Special Warfare were four types

PTF-1 and 2 already mentioned

PTF-3-16 Nasty Class Norwegian Built

PTF-17-22 Trumpy Class Identical to the Nasty just built under license in the USA.

PTF-23-26 Osprey Class

PTF 3 thru 26 all shared the same armament set up, 1 81/50 piggyback mortar, 2 20mm Cannon , 1 40mm Cannon/ M/60s

2 Napier Deltic engines.

Max speed of 43 knots

Range 500 plus NMiles

The Nasty and Trumpy PTF were wooden construction and 80 foot long

The Osprey a new design made of aluminum.

The first two Norwegian Boats were stripped of their torpedoes and designated PTF-3 and 4 with plans for 10 to 15 more boats. Designated "Nasty" Class PTFs.

1963 was a busy year for NSW in Da Nang Vietnam, the SEALs had been there since 1962 training the South Viet SCT (Sea Commando Team) called Biet Hai. and now a base to support the PTFs was hastily being built by key figure in the building the PTF base LtJg Leon Mansi (Who would later command BSU-1 in 1970) When the First PTFs arrived at the "Spook" Base was ready and now fell under MACVSOG (Military Assistance Command Vietnam Special Operations Group) Jan 24 1964.

Established by the CNO on 1 Feb 1964 Boat Support unit ONE, a component command of Naval Special Warfare at Coronado NAB. Its mission to Maintain for and Operate the PTFs in support of SEAL/UDT Operations. Its first Commanding Officer Lt. Burt Knight. While the establishment date of Feb 1964 sounds good the Majority of the Unit was not in Coronado. The PTFs and crews were already deployed to Da Nang Vietnam. The PTF crews in Vietnam were designated Mobile Support Team ONE (MST-1) and immediately began training the chosen South Vietnamese Boat crews (Hai Thuan) on the PTFs, plus navigation,gunnery, air and fleet coordination, communications, multi boat tactics and underway repairs were stressed.

The South Vietnamese Counter part Unit to MACVSOG was called The Coastal Security Service (CSS) (So Phong Ve Duyen Hai) with Cmdr Ho Van Ky Thoai as its first C.O. The CSS like MAVSOG also utilized different services into special action teams. The SCT trained by the SEALs were called "Vega" The Marines "Romulus" The Army "Nimbus" and civilian agents "Cumulus" Indig fishing boats "Nautilus" as well as the PTFs.

Designated by MACVSOG OP -34 Alpha Maritime Operations began in May 1964 and set the pattern of Raids that would last unit 1971. These Ops were unlike any other operations in the Vietnam War because they were carried out mostly in North Vietnam's coastal waters The missions included, direct action, insertion and extraction of SCT and Agents, prisoner snatches, demotion raids, psychological warfare ops, which floated in special one frequency radios that would pick up only a SOG propaganda station. Fishermen would be kidnapped and taken to the South in hopes of turning them and returned to the North.

PTFs conducted Coastal Patrol and Interdiction off North Vietnam including Junk Captures and disruption of North Vietnam's maritime industry. The PTFs aided in Hydrographic surveys of the coastline and available for CSAR. The most dramatic missions of the PTF was shore bombardment and direct combat against North Vietnamese naval forces.

Perhaps the most History making effect of the raids up North occurred 2 Aug 1964 when the Destroyer USS Maddox was making a intel sweep off the coast. PTFs had made a raid and were being chased by North Viet PT boats who saw the Maddox and thought they were part of the raid and attacked the Destroyer. "The Maddox Incident" gave President L B. Johnson the political power to commit a massive influx of US forces to Vietnam and officially began the

Viet Nam war. The PTFs stood down after the incident but resumed operations after two months. The PTFs were "leased" to South Vietnam for deniability. The missions continued through the years some filled with violence and tragedy and others milk runs that could have suddenly turned to death.

Battle damaged Boats and engines were shipped to Subic Bay's BSU-1 Mobile Repair Team (MRT) for retrofit and shipped back to Da Nang and so the cycle continued. MST-1 detachments PTF Crews rotated out every six months. They were The Backbone of PTFs and keeping them operational and S.Viet Boat crews trained. They wanted to go North on Missions and officially ordered not to.

Capt Phil Buckelew stated in his oral history to the US Naval Institute some Americans did go North, but not sanctioned, weather to support a CSS Counterpart, to reassure that all the advise given was valid. It made the SEAL/MST advise to his counterpart more credible, thus more effective. However most of the time MST-1 Boatcrews were in Da Nang behind the scenes keeping the PTFs operational and training CSS Crews.

One of the last missions up to North Vietnam was called Hai Chang Do1 MAVSOG plan 5-71 in 1971 reveals the aggressive nature of PTF operations, Four PTFs near Hon Nieu Island were observing and photographing three large freighters of Chinese registry when they were engaged by a North Viet P-4 Torpedo Boat. The P-4 was sunk but mission compromised they made their run to the South for home. One hour later the PTFs are intercepted by North Vietnamese Gunboats of the Swatow and Shanghai class. The PTFs engaged them leaving behind both North Viet Gunboats badly damaged. Still heading South to the DMZ they were again engaged by North Viet P-4 Toredpedo Boat and Shangi Hai Gunboat. The North VietNameese Boats broke off the engagement when the P-4 was heavily damaged. All PTFs returned to Da Nang with battle damage and one KIA amongst crewmen.

It must also be noted that PTFs also did operations in South Vietnam in IV Core called "Dodge Mark" inserting and extracting SEALS and SCT and providing gunfire support.

Durning the Vienam war 6 PTFs became war losses on Operations North of the DMZ. PTF 9 was sunk by North Vietnamese Aircraft. Sadly some to groundings off hostile shores and one due to a blue on blue engagements.

By 1971 The political winds had changed to US Involvement leaving the war. Boat Support Unit ONE changed its name to Coastal River Squadron One..but still under NSW Command. In Vietnam most Brown Water Navy Boats and operations had already been turned over to South Vietnam and in MACVSOG was also turning over to the CSS more slowly but the end came for the PTFs Detachments 28 April 1972 were disestablished. The Leases of the PTFs to the South Vietnamese were terminated. Unlike the Brown Water Navy that gave their boats to the South Vietnam. Naval Special Warfare brought the PTFs their other NSW combatant craft and assets home.

The PTFs ended their covert war of more than eight and a half years. It can be said of NSW and the PTFs in the Vietnam war ..First Boats In.. Last Boats Out..and the PTF Crewmen the Silent Professionals.

Post Vietnam in the USA the PTFs were divided up between the two NSW East Coast and West Coast Coastal River Squadrons and Subic bay which would become MST-3 in 1972 a forward deployed base for the PTFs. From 1972 to 1978 the PTFs carried out operations in the form of training ops, including UDT/SEAL support ops, simulated attacks on Fleet ships called 'Komar

Ex". Some PTF were used as test platforms for weapons and engineering. Ultimately, the peace time Navy of the 70's found it too expensive to operate and maintain these high speed performance craft and the PTFs were placed out of service between the years of 1976 and 1979 ending the service life of Naval Special Warfare's First Combatant Craft.

There are a few PTFs still survive in Private ownership. In truth they should be procured for a military Museum and saved for all SOF forces and Americans to appreciate.

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