

**The Role of the United States Coast Guard in the Vietnam War:  
An Evaluation**

Maura McCawley

History 122

Instructor Joanne Pendry

May 23, 2022

After France's defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam at the 17th parallel, pending a unifying election in two years. The 1956 election was between Ho Chi Minh, the communist and nationalist who controlled North Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Diem, the capitalist dictator who controlled South Vietnam. The United States canceled the election when Ho looked to be the favorite to win. After the canceled election, the United States supported Ngo's brutal and repressive regime by sending military and financial aid and ignored its human rights violations. From 1960-1963, President John F. Kennedy increased the United States' indirect involvement in Vietnam by sending thousands of advisors and establishing the "flexible response" program. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson involved the United States military in Vietnam directly because he feared a communist takeover. However, the United States faced significant obstacles in its ground war in Vietnam. The Viet Cong, covert South Vietnamese civilians who worked to support the North, massively aided the North Vietnamese war effort by smuggling contraband via waterways and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, hindering the American military's efforts. Throughout the first half of the 1960s, the Air Force's Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service only had access to World War II-era equipment to carry out its rescue missions, and was simultaneously experiencing a pilot shortage due to the start of Operation Rolling Thunder.<sup>1</sup> While it struggled to win the ground war, the United States also struggled to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population as the Viet Cong continued to recruit South Vietnamese civilians through propaganda. Although its poor organization initially resulted in a waste of resources, the involvement of the United States Coast Guard in the Vietnam War was ultimately justified because it assisted the other military services with crucial missions which they could not complete on their own.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Moseley, "Coast Guard Aviation in Vietnam - Combat Rescue and Recovery," Pterogram, April 2004, 3.

At the start of their involvement in the Vietnam war, the Coast Guard's operations were poorly organized and resulted in a severe lack of resources. When the Coast Guard arrived in Vietnam in July of 1965, their mission was to intercept vessels off the shores of South Vietnam and prevent enemy infiltration. However, the United States Navy deployed most of the Coast Guard's vessels offshore where "few, if any, vessels were ever seen," and did not redeploy them inshore until October.<sup>2</sup> In fact, after two months of offshore deployment, the Coast Guard had apprehended only a few dozen Viet Cong supporters and had not seized any contraband.<sup>3</sup> Because the Navy failed to utilize the Coast Guard's inshore capability early in its deployment, the Coast Guard spent several months in Vietnam with little purpose. In that time, both services wasted thousands of dollars in operating costs. On August 11, 1966, the United States Air Force mistakenly attacked the Coast Guard's *Point Welcome*. The ship was out of commission for four months, and two Coast Guardsmen died from injuries they sustained during the attack.<sup>4</sup> In a 2019 interview, former Coast Guard Petty Officer Second Class John Anderson attributed the attack to a lack of communication between the Air Force and the Navy.<sup>5</sup> The Navy's strategies for managing the Coast Guard were inefficient and led to a miscommunication with the Air Force that cost the military material resources and human lives. However, despite its initial poor orchestration and wastefulness, the Coast Guard's involvement in the Vietnam War was justified because of its assistance to the rest of the military.

In order to complete their mission of securing South Vietnam's coasts and preventing Viet Cong sea infiltration, it was imperative that the Navy work with the Coast Guard. On April

---

<sup>2</sup> Alex Larzelere, *The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965-1975* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Sheehan, "Sea Watch for Foe Off Vietnam Long and Tedious," *New York Times*, July 12, 1966, 39616 edition, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Larzelere, 24-28.

<sup>5</sup> John Anderson, "John Anderson Collection," Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, November 12, 2019, <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/loc.natlib.afc2001001.120615>.

16, 1965, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Paul Nitze sent a memorandum to the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Fowler that requested the assistance of the Coast Guard. In it, Nitze addressed the “major disadvantages” of the Navy’s current vessels and requested access to the Coast Guard’s “more suitable patrol craft” that could handle the shallow, rough waters of South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Soon after, Fowler and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sent a joint memorandum to President Johnson in which they formally requested the participation of the Coast Guard in the Vietnam conflict. They cited that the Coast Guard was “well suited for this mission” as they were “equipped and trained to prevent sea infiltration.”<sup>7</sup> Nitze, Fowler, and McNamara all knew that the support of the Coast Guard was essential to the Navy’s war efforts in Vietnam because their equipment and personnel were prepared to carry out the mission while the Navy’s were not. The Navy’s disadvantages mentioned in Nitze’s memorandum made it much more difficult and expensive to prevent enemy sea infiltration. Had Johnson not agreed to involve the Coast Guard in the Vietnam War, preventing sea infiltration would likely soon have become infeasible. The Coast Guard’s assistance in this mission was essential in slowing the flow of contraband to North Vietnam. However, the U.S. government could not simply loan the Coast Guard’s vessels to the Navy without their personnel, nor could it allow the Coast Guard to act on its own once stationed in Vietnam.

The Navy’s cooperation with and willingness to work alongside, rather than above, the Coast Guard was crucial to the success of its coastal mission in Vietnam. With limited support from the Vietnam Navy, the U.S. Navy often lacked the firepower needed for contact with the enemy. Cooperation with the Coast Guard provided this firepower and led to the success of both services in several interceptions with enemy trawlers off the coast of South Vietnam, especially

---

<sup>6</sup> Paul H. Nitze to Henry H. Fowler, April 16, 1965, Coast Guard Historian’s Office.

<sup>7</sup> Henry H. Fowler and Robert S. McNamara to Lyndon B. Johnson, April 29, 1965, Coast Guard Historian’s Office.

during the Tet Offensive in 1968.<sup>8</sup> Without the active support of the Coast Guard, the Navy had neither the equipment nor the personnel to handle the coastal conflict in Vietnam. The Navy's willingness to cooperate with the Coast Guard ultimately led to its many successes, as neither service could have completed its mission without the other. The Coast Guard's joint effort with the Navy delayed the impending Communist victory because the two branches were able to work together well. Because their missions were so similar, interservice rivalry between the two branches was rare. While seamen in both services likely would have had difficulty working with other departments rather than above, both acknowledged each other's contributions and "knew that neither service could carry out the mission on its own," while Navy sailors "appreciate[d] the strong spirit" and unique abilities of Coast Guard personnel.<sup>9</sup> The similarities between the services and their objectives ensured that they carried out the mission effectively. The unique attitudes and capabilities of the Coast Guardsmen encouraged Navy sailors to use new approaches to issues that utilized the strengths of both branches, thus improving its efficiency. Because the Navy did not see it as a competitor, the involvement of the Coast Guard significantly improved its effectiveness at preventing sea infiltration. Neither the Navy nor the Coast Guard could prevent the Viet Cong from invading South Vietnam via the sea, so cooperation between the two branches was essential to the Navy's coastal mission. However, the Coast Guard's military assistance in the Vietnam War did not end with the Navy, as they played a crucial role in the Air Force's search and rescue operations.

The Coast Guard's assistance in the Air Force's search and rescue missions in the Vietnam War was vital to the missions' success, as the Air Force could not have completed them

---

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Wiarda, "The U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam: Achieving Success in a Difficult War," *Naval War College Review*, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 38-39.  
<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss2/5/>

<sup>9</sup> Wiarda, 39.

on its own. To combat the Air Force's equipment and pilot shortages, the Air Force and the Coast Guard agreed on an Aviator Exchange Program in March of 1967 which allowed the Air Force to gain "experience in using the specialized search, rescue, and recovery equipment employed by [the Coast Guard]." <sup>10</sup> One such piece of equipment was the Coast Guard's Automated Merchant Vessel Report system which kept a log of ship movements and could respond to distress signals in the area. <sup>11</sup> The exchange program granted the Air Force access to the Coast Guard's Automated Merchant Vessel Report stations in the Pacific, allowing it to carry out its search and rescue missions with greater efficiency. As the ground war in Vietnam intensified and the need for efficient search and rescue missions increased, the Coast Guard's advanced equipment was necessary for the Air Force, as its own equipment could not keep up. The Air Force would have been unable to keep pace with the influx of search and rescue missions it received in the late 1960s without the Coast Guard's support. The Coast Guard was also of great value to the Air Force's search and rescue missions because the Coast Guard better trained their pilots for them. Most of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service's helicopter pilots were transitioned fixed-wing pilots who were unqualified to fly helicopters. The Coast Guard's aviators, however, were "well-experienced helicopter pilots" who "arrived fully qualified." <sup>12</sup> To further train servicemen in both branches, the Coast Guard established a school "devoted exclusively to search and rescue training" on Governor's Island in October, 1966 (when the two services were still negotiating the terms of the exchange program), at which students learned from both Air Force and Coast Guard instructors how to carry out successful rescue missions. <sup>13</sup> Coast Guard aviators were better suited for search and rescue missions than the Air Force, so its assistance

---

<sup>10</sup> Larzelere, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Alfonso Narvaez, "Coast Guard Rescue Center Key to Far-Flung Operation," *New York Times*, November 8, 1969, 40831 edition, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Moseley, 6.

<sup>13</sup> "Coast Guard Opens School on Governors Island," *New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 39, 712 edition, 86.

and training were integral to the missions' success. While some Air Force pilots may have had experience with search and rescue missions, their training would have been far different from that of a Coast Guard aviator. Because the Air Force did not train its pilots to fly over water or provide the extensive search and rescue training that the Coast Guard did, the Coast Guard's assistance was necessary. The Coast Guard offered crucial support to the Air Force during the Vietnam War by providing the necessary equipment, personnel, and training for its search and rescue missions. However, the Coast Guard's role in the Vietnam War went beyond providing tactical assistance to the other services, as their humanitarian efforts aided the missions of the rest of the United States military.

The Coast Guard's humanitarian missions in Vietnam improved civilian-military relations and bolstered the country's image as a whole to the Vietnamese locals they encountered, thus making its involvement in the war of value to the rest of the military. In August 1966, to counter the Viet Cong's propaganda campaign in South Vietnam, the Coast Guard established an island adoption program that aimed to improve relations with Vietnamese locals as well as distribute accurate news and "educational and informational materials in order to promote understanding" of the United States military's mission in Vietnam. The program encouraged Coast Guardsmen to exchange gifts and form personal connections with villagers.<sup>14</sup> Many South Vietnamese locals had negative opinions of the United States as a result of the extreme and unnecessary violence that was often inflicted on them by American servicemen. The Coast Guard's island adoption program improved the locals' opinions of the military by humanizing American servicemen and establishing relationships between the villages and the military. In addition to the dissemination of pro-American news and literature, this program made the locals much more likely to want to

---

<sup>14</sup> Eugene N. Tulich, Paul C. Scotti, and Kenneth Arbogast, *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia During the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington D.C.: United States Coast Guard, 1986), 28.

cooperate with the American and South Vietnamese militaries and avoid involvement with the Viet Cong. The locals' improved relationships with the military and their new willingness to cooperate resulted in less resistance to the American military, which was valuable to the rest of the services' separate missions in Vietnam. In his 2019 interview, John Anderson described the mission he led to deliver medical supplies to the "friendly people" of a local village in South Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> In another interview, former Coast Guard Petty Officer Third Class George Eric Anderson described a similar mission in which his boat went ashore to paint an orphanage for the "good people" of a local village.<sup>16</sup> Both men described dangerous missions to help the South Vietnamese locals that they felt were worth the risk because of how friendly and in need they were. By providing aid to these villages that they could not provide for themselves, the Coast Guard's humanitarian missions greatly improved civilian-military relations in South Vietnam. Giving the locals a chance to interact with and accept aid from the Coast Guardsmen further humanized the American military and made them more inclined to cooperate with the other services. The Coast Guard's humanitarian missions in Vietnam helped the other American military services accomplish their own missions in the Vietnam war by improving civilians' relations with and images of the military and thus reducing their resistance to cooperating with American forces.

As their involvement in the Vietnam War increased throughout the 1960s, the American military's various missions became ever more difficult to complete. They faced several obstacles that they could not overcome on their own. In response to the growing challenge in Vietnam, the military turned to the Coast Guard for assistance. However, early in their deployment, the Coast Guard's involvement was so disorganized that they lost thousands of dollars in resources and two

---

<sup>15</sup> John Anderson.

<sup>16</sup> George Eric Anderson, "George Eric Anderson Collection," Veteran's History Project, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/loc.natlib.afc2001001.44951>.



servicemen's lives. Despite the Coast Guard's early wastefulness and poor organization, its involvement in the Vietnam War was justified because it provided the rest of the military with essential assistance in missions they could not complete independently.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, George Eric. Interviewed by Lars Anderson. N.d. *Veteran's History Project*. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.44951/>.
- Anderson, John. Interviewed by Joe Galloway. November 12, 2019. *Veteran's History Project*. <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.120615/>
- “Coast Guard Opens School on Governors Island.” *New York Times*, October 16, 1966. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1966/10/16/82918069.html?pageNumber=86>.
- Fowler, Henry H., and Robert S. McNamara. Memorandum to Lyndon B. Johnson. “Memorandum for the President.” Department of Defense. Washington, D.C.: Coast Guard Historian's Office, April 29, 1965.
- Larzelere, Alex. *The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965-1975*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997.
- Moseley, John. “Coast Guard Aviation in Vietnam - Combat Rescue and Recovery.” *Pterogram*, April 2004, 2–19.
- Narvaez, Alfonso. “Coast Guard Rescue Center Key to Far-Flung Operation.” *New York Times*, November 8, 1969. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/11/08/79434989.html?pageNumber=35>.
- Nitze, Paul H. Memorandum to Henry H. Fowler. Department of the Navy. Washington, D.C.: Coast Guard Historian's Office, April 16, 1965.
- Sheehan, Neil. “Sea Watch for Foe Off Vietnam Long and Tedious.” *New York Times*, July 12, 1966. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1966/07/12/82486494.html?pageNumber=4>
- Tulich, Eugene N., Paul C. Scotti, and Kenneth Arbogast. *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia During the Vietnam Conflict*. Washington D.C.: United States Coast Guard, 1986.
- Wiarda, Jonathan S. “The U.S. Coast Guard in Vietnam: Achieving Success in a Difficult War.” *Naval War College Review* 51, no. 2 (1998): 30–46. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss2/5/>.