

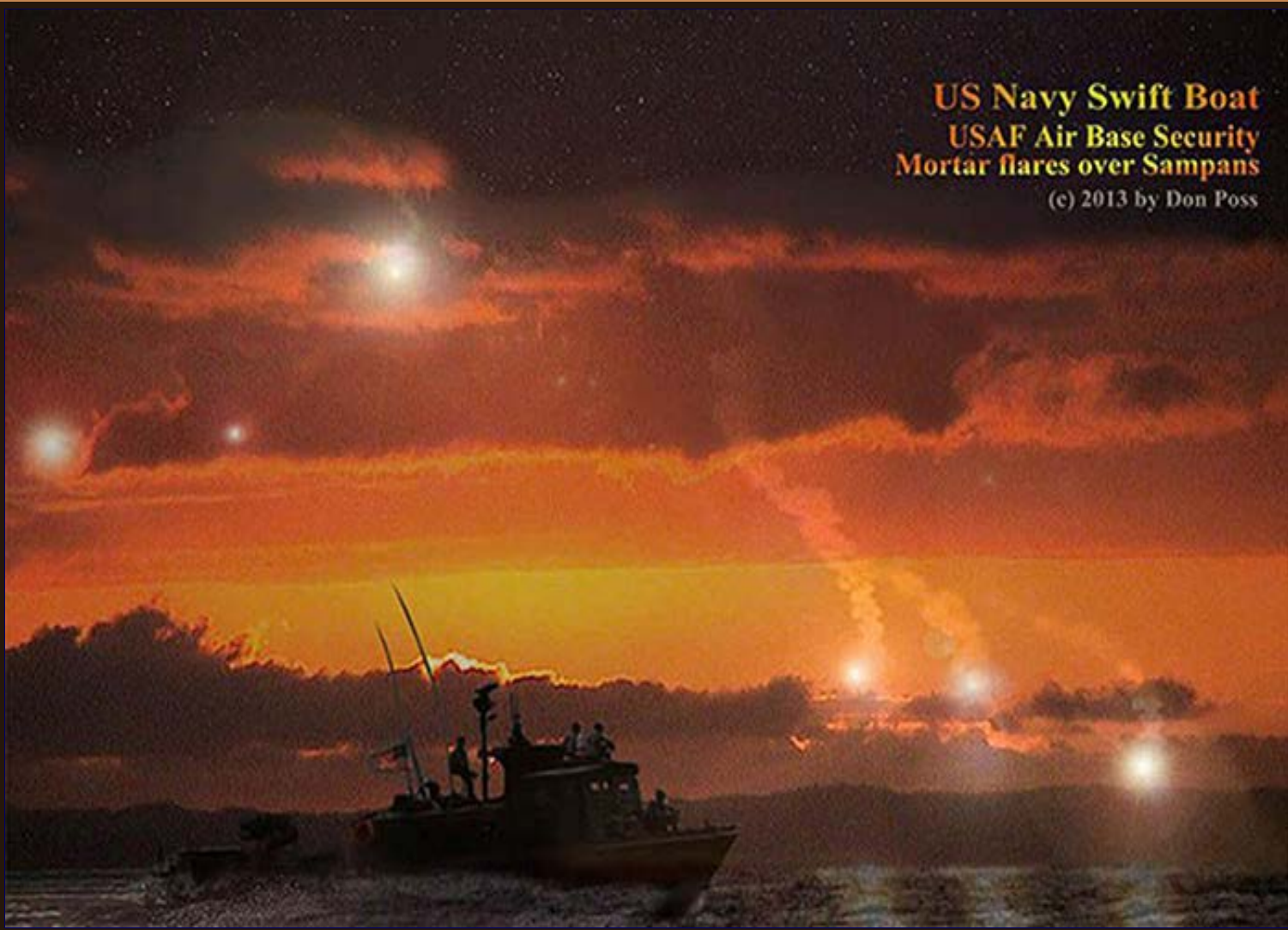
VIETNAM

Air Base Coastal Defense Operation Market Time

Interdiction of NVA Weapons/Supplies by
U.S. Navy Coastal Security and USAF Security Police Squadrons Air Base Defense
1968-1969

© 2013, by Steve Gattis, VSPA LM #49,
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US Navy Swift Boat
USAF Air Base Security
Mortar flares over Sampans
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Tet 1968 involved attacks on thousands of US personnel throughout South Vietnam. This article and graphic is to demonstrate the direct link associated with enemy insurgency and resupply activity, coastal security and Air Base defense on the ten major Air Bases in the Republic of Vietnam.

The following information was researched and summarized by Steve Gattis (Cam Ranh Bay AB, 1968-1969) from documents in Air Force and Naval Archives. It is provided as a long overdue thank you to the men who worked Operation Market Time and the Navy swift boats in the South China Sea off the coast of South Vietnam, especially in the area along coastlines of the Air Bases at Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang.

The majority of Navy patrol boats along the Air Base shorelines in South Vietnam were Navy Swift Boats, which were larger at 50 feet than PBRs at 31 or 32 feet. The swift boats were specifically built for counterinsurgency, coastal patrol and SEAL insertion. They were designated PCFs or *Patrol Craft, Fast* as compared to PBR, which was *Patrol Craft, River*. Initial coast patrols were performed by PBRs; however, a major event in February, 1965 near Nha Trang Air Base mandated that specific operations be conducted to interdict enemy resupply and insurgency efforts from the South China Sea.

Air Policemen and Security Policemen stationed along the South China Sea on the coast of South Vietnam received intelligence briefings regarding trawlers and enemy activity along the coast. The first major event involving North Vietnamese trawlers attempting to resupply Viet Cong and NVA units occurred on February 16, 1965 in Khánh Hòa Province in an area known as Vung Ro Bay, located 60 miles North of Nha Trang. A 130 foot trawler camouflaged with trees was observed by a US Army MEDEVAC helicopter in a

desolate bay attempting to unload weapons and ammunition. South Vietnamese aircraft, naval vessels and troops engaged the trawler and its crew on land and sea. 100 tons of weapons and ammunition were seized, including 4000 rifles and machine guns, one million rounds of ammunition, 1,500 grenades, 2000 mortar rounds and 500 pounds of explosives. The recovered weapons, KIA enemy crew and the battle with entrenched Viet Cong in concrete bunkers provided firm, positive proof that enemy resupply with Soviet and Chinese made weapons was coming into South Vietnam along the coast of the South China Sea, directly from Communist China and Russia. *Operation Market Time* was subsequently initiated on 11 March 1965 in an effort to prevent future enemy resupply and insurgency efforts along the coast of the South China Sea.

USAF Security Policemen working at Cam Ranh Bay AB and Nha Trang AB heard *Swift Boat* "Halo Shampoo" and "Aphrodite" radio traffic from the *Nha Trang Coastal Surveillance Center* as boat operators would advise when they were in the area, with or without lights, so that they could avoid our .50 cal harassment and interdiction fire along the coast. They also coordinated with Air Force Security Police Squadron's mortar or "lightning batteries" to fire mortar illumination rounds along the coast so the swift boat operators at sea could observe our shoreline.

Adrenalin ran hard at a Cam Ranh Bay Phantom Flight briefing during Guardmount from February 29 leading into March 1, 1968, when we were told that trawlers had been detected on February 28 by Navy Neptune aircraft from Cam Ranh Bay AB. Four trawlers were moving South several miles out, along the coast. Two of them were followed by the aircraft from Cam Ranh Bay while the other trawlers were followed and monitored by Market Time units. The intelligence was outstanding as proven by a huge incident on March 1, 1968 along the coast in Khánh Hòa Province, the provincial district that included Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang.

There were a total of five contacts with enemy trawlers on Feb 29 and March 1 along the South China Sea coastline. Three enemy trawlers were destroyed, one was seized and one returned to Communist China. First contact was off of Vũng Tàu on February 29 when a trawler crossed the 12 mile limit and headed for shore near the Bo De River. A *Market Time* blocking force from Vũng Tàu fired on the trawler to make it stop. When the trawler returned fire it was destroyed by several direct hits that caused ammunition to explode. The second contact was off of Nha Trang. Although there were four coastal points of attempted resupply and insurgency that night, by the North Vietnamese Navy at remote beaches and bays, the most significant was near Nha Trang where a 100 foot trawler came ashore with weapons and ammunition destined to resupply the NVA and Viet Cong during the aftermath of the TET attacks. The trawler was destroyed and fourteen North Vietnamese crew members were killed when attacked by an Air Force AC 47, five *Market Time* Swift Boats and two South Vietnamese Navy junks. Fourteen tons of weapons and ammunition were recovered, including an anti-aircraft gun with 65 cases of ammunition. The third incident occurred near Quang Ngai and the Tau Cau River where a battle between *Market Time* vessels and a North Vietnamese trawler occurred. Army helicopters assisted in the battle but could not stop the trawler from making it to the beach. The *Market Time* attack and potential capture caused the North Vietnamese crew to scuttle the trawler in an explosion that yielded a fireball 500 feet high. The fourth contact was approximately 42 miles North of Qui Nhon where a trawler was encountered several miles off shore. The trawler turned around and was monitored all the way back to the coast of Communist China without incident. The fifth trawler was abandoned with a Chinese flag and supplies that were seized and taken to Đà Nẵng for examination.

Although Tet 1968 involved attacks on thousands of US personnel throughout South Vietnam, the purpose of this graphic and article is to demonstrate the direct link associated with enemy insurgency and resupply activity, coastal security and Air Base defense on the ten major Air Bases in the Republic of Vietnam. The four locations along the coast of South Vietnam selected by the North Vietnamese Navy for resupply were specific to TET and the planned attacks on Air Bases defended by Air Force Security Policemen. The Vũng Tàu area resupply effort involved VC and NVA units that had attacked Biên Hòa AB and Tân Sơn Nhứt AB a total of 21 times from January 31 to February 29, the month before the trawler was destroyed on the approach to Vũng Tàu. The loss of those supplies reduced the attacks on both bases to a total of four-times in March. The resupplied weapons and ammunition would have also affected security policemen at Vũng Tàu AB and eventually made their way to Bình Thủy AB that had been attacked twelve times in February and six times in March. The resupply effort in Khánh Hòa Province involved Nha Trang AB that had been attacked on Jan 31 and again on February 16. VC and NVA in Khánh Hòa Province needed logistical support for resupply as well as to prepare for attacks on the local coastal bases of Cam Ranh Bay, which was attacked on March 4, Tuy Hòa AB that was attacked on March 6, and Phan Rang AB that was attacked on March 7. The trawler that was destroyed at Quang Ngai would have resupplied VC and NVA units to the North near Đà Nẵng AB that was attacked twice in the month prior to the trawler being destroyed. If supplies had come in near Qui Nhon AB, they would have resupplied the enemy that attacked Phù Cát AB on 6 February, affected the security policemen stationed at Qui Nhon, and resupplied the enemy that had attacked Pleiku twice in the prior month and three times in March.

The destruction of three heavily laden trawlers, the seizure of another and the interdiction of the trawler supply routes by *Operation Market Time*, reduced the number of attacks on the ten major Air Bases by 40% from 40 attacks between Jan 31 and February 29, 1968 to 16 attacks between March 1 and March 31.

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