



H-Gram 028: U.S. Navy Valor in Vietnam, 1969

25 July 2019

This H-gram marks National Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day. Today, all U.S. Navy museums hosted commemoration events, which included presenting pins provided by the Vietnam War Commemoration Commission to all Vietnam War veterans in attendance as a gesture of appreciation and respect for their service and sacrifice. Veterans returning from the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s did not receive the gratitude from our nation that has become the norm today. Today's commemoration at the National Museum of the United States Navy in Washington, DC, also focused on the significant contribution of our sister service, the U.S. Coast Guard, to Operation Market Time (the interdiction of Vietnamese Communist seaborne supply routes) that cost the lives of eight Coastguardsmen. The NAVADMIN from CNO directing U.S. Navy participation in National Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day may be found here [<https://www.public.navy.mil/bupers-npc/reference/messages/Documents/NAVADMINS/NAV2019/NAV19064.txt>].

50th Anniversary: Vietnam War

The character of the Vietnam War changed dramatically in 1969. However, intense combat continued, as well as acts of heroism. I don't have overall numbers for 1969, but during 1968, crews on board the river patrol boats (PBRs) alone earned one Medal of Honor, six Navy Crosses, four Legions of



A PBR (patrol boat, river) on My Tho River, South Vietnam, June 1969 (K-74761).

Merit, 24 Silver Stars, 290 Bronze Stars, 363 Navy Commendation Medals, and more than 500 Purple Hearts, with one out of every three Sailors being wounded. The numbers would have been comparable in 1969, for although there were no Tet-scale offensives and bombing had been halted over North Vietnam, the pace of riverine and coastal operations by the U.S. Navy continued largely unabated. They began to slow somewhat toward the end of that year as the new Nixon administration's "Vietnamization" policy increasingly took effect and as the South Vietnamese Navy took on more combat operations. Nevertheless, three U.S. Navy personnel would be awarded the Medal of Honor for combat action in 1969;

Lieutenant Junior Grade Joseph R. Kerrey, USNR, was awarded the Medal of Honor for action on 14 March 1969 while serving as a SEAL team leader on

a mission to capture key Viet Cong leaders that turned into a major firefight. Despite his severe wounds, Kerrey continued to lead his men in the successful accomplishment of their mission, resulting in the acquisition of critical intelligence. Kerrey went on to serve as U.S. senator from Nebraska.

Hospital Corpsman Second Class David R. Ray was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor for action on 19 March 1969 while serving as corpsman with Battery D, 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division, when a battalion-sized Viet Cong assault penetrated the battery's perimeter. Despite serious wounds, Ray repeatedly exposed himself to intense enemy fire to aid wounded Marines, and was forced to defend himself from direct attack by two enemy soldiers. He finally sacrificed his life to shield a wounded Marine from an enemy grenade explosion.

Lieutenant Thomas G. Kelley was awarded the Medal of Honor for action on 15 June 1969 while serving as commander of River Assault Division 152, when his column of eight river assault craft came under intense Viet Cong fire. Despite his own severe wounds, Kelley continued to lead and inspire the other boats until they were out of harm's way.

For the complete Medal of Honor citations, please see attachment H-028-1.

The "Tet Offensive" in early 1968 represented a psychological turning point in American political support for the war effort in Vietnam despite the fact that the series of surprise attacks was beaten back with catastrophic losses to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam—losses from which they never really recovered. (In the end, South Vietnam would fall in 1975 to a conventional attack by the North Vietnamese Army, not due to the Viet Cong insurgency.) However, the size, surprise, and casualties of the Tet Offensive shocked and disillusioned much of the American public, who had been led to believe that victory was just around the corner by optimistic pronouncements by senior military and political leaders. President Lyndon Johnson had halted the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam in order to induce the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. This worked, although I would argue that the severe Vietnamese Communist losses

in during Tet (and in several "mini-Tet" offensives), as well as severe damage to North Vietnamese infrastructure caused by the bombing, had a lot to do with it.

Richard M. Nixon won the 1968 U.S. presidential election in part because he claimed to have a plan to end the Vietnam War, the details of which were not revealed before the election. In a speech at the end of December 1968, President Nixon gave a name to the new strategy: "Vietnamization." Under this strategy, U.S. forces would increasingly focus on training and equipping the South Vietnamese army, so that it could pick up an ever-increasing share of the burden of fighting, allowing the U.S. forces to gradually draw down and get out of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese responded with a strategy of their own: "Talk while fighting, fight while talking" (probably sounds better in Vietnamese). As a result, nearly as many Americans died during months of negotiating for the shape of the table for the Peace Talks as died during the same number of months of combat in 1968.

The North Vietnamese viewed negotiations, as well as declining U.S. domestic support for the war, as a signal of weakness of U.S. political will. Their strategy thus became to both protract the fighting and protract the negotiations, while using the cessation of bombing to build up their conventional fighting power (with large quantities of Soviet and Communist Chinese military equipment that came into North Vietnam with no hindrance). Their intent was to wait out the United States before attempting to invade South Vietnam (they did this prematurely in 1972, and were beaten back by U.S. naval and air power, but were successful in 1975 when the U.S. did not intervene except to assist with limited evacuations).

The negotiations and political machinations had little effect on U.S. Navy operations in the early part of 1969 other than that aircraft operating from aircraft carriers in the South China Sea bombed enemy targets in South Vietnam rather than North Vietnam itself. The U.S. Navy did fly reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam, which were occasionally shot at despite the "truce," and the United States would respond with limited retaliatory strikes on the

southern part of North Vietnam, which did little to curb the North Vietnamese build-up. However, the war in the rivers and canals of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam (Operation Game Warden) and on several rivers south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) (Operation Clearwater) continued unabated for months and, in fact, increased with the advent of Operation SEALORDS, which pushed U.S. riverine activity right up to the Cambodian border.

I will cover more on the "Vietnamization" of the war in a future H-gram.

H-028-1: Medal of Honor Citations—U.S. Navy, Vietnam, 1969

H-Gram 028-1, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

March 2019

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Joseph R. Kerrey, United States Naval Reserve

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty on 14 March 1969 while serving as a SEAL Team Leader during action against enemy aggressor (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam. Acting in response to reliable intelligence Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey led his SEAL Team on a mission to capture important members of the enemy's area political cadre known to be located on an island in the bay of Nha Trang. In order to surprise the enemy, he and his team scaled a 350-foot sheer cliff to place themselves above the ledge on which the enemy was located. Splitting his team in two elements, Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey led his men in a treacherous downward descent to the enemy's camp. Just as they neared the end of their descent, intense enemy fire was directed at them, and Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey received massive injuries from a grenade which exploded at his feet and threw him backward onto the jagged rocks. Although bleeding profusely and suffering great pain, he displayed outstanding courage and presence of mind in immediately directing his element's fire into the heart of the enemy camp. Utilizing his radioman, Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey called in the second element's fire support which caught the Viet Cong in a devastating cross fire. After successfully suppressing the enemy's fire, and although immobilized by his multiple wounds, he continued to maintain calm, superlative control as he ordered his team to secure and defend an extraction site. Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey resolutely directed his men, despite his near unconscious state, until he was eventually evacuated by helicopter. The havoc brought to the enemy by this

very successful mission cannot be overestimated. The enemy who were captured provided critical intelligence to the allied effort. Lieutenant (jg) Kerrey's courageous and inspiring leadership, valiant fighting spirit, and tenacious devotion to duty in the face of almost overwhelming opposition, sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Hospital Corpsman Second Class David R. Ray, United States Navy

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a corpsman with Battery D, 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division, at Phu Loc 6, near An Hoa, Quang Nam Province, in the Republic of Vietnam, on 19 March 1969. During the early morning hours, an estimated battalion-sized enemy force launched a determined assault against the batteries position, and succeeded in effecting a penetration of the barbed-wire perimeter. The initial burst of enemy fire caused numerous casualties among the Marines who had immediately manned their howitzers during the rocket and mortar attack. Undaunted by the intense hostile fire, Petty Officer Ray moved from parapet to parapet, rendering emergency medical treatment to the wounded. Although seriously wounded himself while rendering first aid to a Marine casualty, he refused medical treatment and continued his life saving efforts. While he was bandaging and attempting to comfort another wounded Marine, Petty Officer Ray was forced to battle two enemy soldiers who attacked his position, personally killing one and wounding another. Rapidly losing his strength as a result of his own severe wounds, he nonetheless managed to move through the hail of enemy fire to other casualties. Once again, he was faced with the intense fire of oncoming enemy troops, and despite the grave danger and insurmountable odds, succeeded in treating the wounded and holding off the enemy until he ran out of ammunition, at which time he sustained fatal wounds. Petty Officer Ray's final act of heroism was to protect the patient he was treating. He threw himself upon the wounded Marine, thus saving the man's life when an enemy grenade exploded nearby. By his determined and persevering actions, courageous spirit, and selfless

devotion to his Marine comrades, Petty Officer Ray served to inspire the men of Battery D to heroic efforts in defeating the enemy. His conduct throughout was in keeping of the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

(The *Spruance*-class destroyer USS *David R. Ray* [DD-971] was named in HM2 Ray's honor, commissioned on 19 November 1977 and decommissioned on 28 February 2002, until it was sunk as a target in July 2008. The ship still remains protected under the Sunken Military Craft Act.)

Lieutenant Thomas G. Kelley, United States Navy

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty on the afternoon of 15 June 1969 while serving as Commander River Assault Division 152 during combat operations against enemy aggressor forces in the Republic of Vietnam. Lieutenant Kelley was in charge of a column of eight river assault craft which were evacuating one company of United States Army infantry troops on the east bank of the Ong Muang Canal in Kien Hoa Province, when one of the armored troop carriers reported a mechanical failure of a loading ramp. At approximately the same time, Viet Cong forces opened fire from the opposite bank of the canal. After issuing orders for the crippled troop carrier to raise its ramp manually, and for the remaining boats to form a protective cordon around the disabled craft, Lieutenant Kelly, realizing the extreme danger to his column and its inability to clear the ambush site until the crippled unit was repaired, boldly maneuvered the monitor in which he was embarked to the exposed side of the protective cordon in direct line with the enemy's fire and ordered the monitor to commence firing. Suddenly an enemy rocket scored a direct hit on the coxswain's flat, the shell penetrating the thick armor plate, and the explosion spraying shrapnel in all directions. Sustaining serious head wounds from the blast, which hurled him to the deck of the monitor, Lieutenant Kelley disregarded his own severe injuries and attempted to continue directing the other boats. Although unable to move from the deck or speak clearly into the radio, he succeeded in relaying his commands through one of his men until

the enemy attack was silenced and the boats were able to move to an area of safety. Lieutenant Kelley's brilliant leadership, bold initiative, and resolute determination served to inspire his men and provided the impetus needed to carry out the mission after he was medically evacuated by helicopter. His extraordinary courage under fire, and his selfless devotion to duty sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service."