

She was 25 miles from her element, the sea—anchored in a Vietnamese river not much wider than she was long. Enemy forces were everywhere around her; she was practically a sitting duck for attacks.

But the tank landing ship *USS Harnett County* (LST 821) performed her mission so well that she earned the Navy's highest honor for a ship: the Presidential Unit Citation "for extraordinary heroism."

She was awarded the PUC for a tour for which she had already received the Navy Unit Commendation—four and a half months in the Vam Co Dong River early last year during Operation Giant Slingshot.

According to her citation for the PUC, "The ship's performance was superb in every phase of her diverse actions"—which included providing communications, supply and repair services to her brood of river gunboats, patrol boats and assault craft; fire support for the boats and troops ashore with her rapid-fire 40-mm cannons; fuel and ammunition for helicopter gunships; medical evacuation facilities; and defense for herself against enemy swimmers, mines, rockets and grenades.

She was the southern anchor on the Vam Co Dong for the intricate Giant Slingshot operation, designed to choke off the flow of enemy troops and supplies in the area west and southwest of Saigon.

During her river tour, *Harnett County* was attacked twice by 107-mm rockets and once by rocket-propelled grenades. At least twice, other rockets aimed at the ship were captured before they could be fired.

But the greatest danger was underwater. The debris-filled, muddy river provided almost perfect cover for mines and swimmers.

To meet the threat, minesweepers made frequent sweeps around the ship at random intervals. Grappling hooks, concussion grenades, sharpshooters and sentries (with orders to shoot at anything moving in the water), and feathering collars on the anchor chains also helped frustrate enemy swimmer-sapper attacks.

Feathering collars—five-gallon paint cans with the ends removed—were pulled up along the anchor chains at intervals to cut any lines that may have been attached to the chains.

Besides protecting herself, the LST gave direct support to allied forces on land and water. An Army captain told this story, recalling his experience while leading a patrol of Vietnamese soldiers:

"The enemy began raking the area with automatic weapons fire, and they were moving in our direction. We needed fire support—and we needed it quickly.

"Then I remembered *Harnett County*.

"I called the ship on my field radio, briefly describing our situation and the location. Illumination rounds were popping overhead within two minutes. Then 40-mm cannon fire began ripping the jungle less than 50 yards from us.

"I radioed target corrections and the Navy answered with a protective curtain of firepower. . . . Another call and an even heavier barrage hit the NVA troops. Then

Army artillery was added to the fire.

"The fight was over in minutes and I ordered cease fire. The enemy had disappeared. . . . Not one of my soldiers had been hit.

"*Harnett County* saved my life that night, and the lives of the Vietnamese troops I was advising. Those 40-mm shells were a welcome sight."

Similar experiences gave many other allied Navy men and soldiers good reason to be grateful to *Harnett County*. Her crew had passed the ultimate test of actual combat.

In the PUC citation, the President put it this way:

"Through her invaluable support efforts, *Harnett County* contributed materially to the success of riverine forces in accounting for numerous enemy casualties and the capture of vital guns and equipment.

"Despite long, dangerous hours, difficult, heavy labor under the most trying conditions, night sessions at battle stations while awaiting enemy attack, fierce enemy rocket barrages, personnel and material casualties, and the ever-present danger of mines, the morale and esprit de corps of her officers and men never faltered. Their extraordinary performance and selfless dedication throughout this period were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

"(signed) Richard Nixon."

Above left: *USS Harnett County* (LST 821) with part of her brood of river gunboats and assault craft as she rides anchor just south of Ben Luc Bridge on the Vam Co Dong River in Republic of Vietnam. Left: *USS Harnett County* (LST 821) performed her mission so well that she earned the PUC. Right: Map of Operation Giant Slingshot.

