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## Vietnam vets' experience on boats utilized in Iraq

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By Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY

LITTLE CREEK, Va. — Thomas Cutler's combat experience on a patrol boat in Vietnam is more than 30 years old, yet it couldn't be more relevant to today's Navy.

Cutler, 58, is among a group of Vietnam vets informally advising the Navy as it reconstitutes river patrols. The Navy wants to extend its reach into the shallow brown waters of deltas and rivers, often the frontline in the war against terrorists and insurgents. Next spring, the first sailors since the days of the Vietnam-era swift boats will relieve Marines on river patrols protecting Haditha dam in Iraq.

"It is dangerous," says Cutler, an author and former naval officer. "But you don't go into the military to knit socks."

After Vietnam, the Navy abandoned its river patrols and focused instead on the big ships and fleets to oppose the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Now, the Navy plans a river force of three 12-boat squadrons. Each boat will have a crew of five. The boats will be able to top 40 knots, stop quickly and operate in less than a foot of water. They'll have armor and .50-caliber machine guns.

In all, there will be about 900 sailors involved in the river patrol effort. By comparison, there were 4,500 sailors in 450 boats patrolling coastal and inland waters during Vietnam.

At first, Vietnam veterans were concerned "we weren't building a robust enough force," said Capt. Michael Jordan, commodore of Riverine Group One. "But when we described what we were doing, they said, 'This makes sense.' "

The main mission is defeating Iraqi insurgents who often try to escape on rivers after attacking, said Adm. Michael Mullen, the chief of naval operations.

Iraq's rivers "are really the old smugglers' routes," Jordan said, "routes that have been in use for hundreds if not thousands of years. We've got checkpoints on roads but none on the water."

The Navy's river patrols eventually will be deployed around the world as part of the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command. The command, established in October 2005, aims to fight piracy, stop narcotics trafficking and intercept the flow of illegal arms and weapons of mass destruction, said Rear Adm. Donald Bullard, its leader. It also is the home of the Seabees, the Navy's construction teams, and technicians who defuse explosives.

The command allows the Navy to play a more visible role in the war on terror. "This is not just about relieving stress on the Army and Marines," Bullard said.

Vietnam veterans have participated in two seminars with Navy officials to advise them on the new river force. One was held at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., and the other was in Norfolk, Va.

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The Navy sought Cutler's expertise, in part, because he wrote a history of the Navy's river patrols in Vietnam, *Brown Water, Black Berets*.

Before sailors patrol the Euphrates River in Iraq, they'll be trained to fight by Marines and learn the basic language skills they'll need to develop relationships with the local people. Simply being able to talk about fishing can be helpful, Jordan said.

"With language training, we can show that we care about people rather than imposing our will. That we're really there to help them out," said Lt. Cmdr. Frank Okata, 33, a logistics officer for the river patrol squadron.

Okata said the sailors need small boats to take the fight to the insurgents. "Most of our enemies aren't going to be sending out fleets to engage us," he said. "We need small boats to go after them."

Cutler said that mission makes lessons from Vietnam more relevant.

He counseled the Navy to think about snakes, leeches and malaria and to consider factors such as the way moonlight can silhouette a target or a sailor and how the glare of sunshine can blind a river crew.

Larry Weatherall, 58, a veteran of more than 200 river patrol missions in Vietnam, advised sailors to rely on helicopters and other aircraft for help in killing adversaries. He said the need for air support was an important lesson from Vietnam.

"When you get in a firefight, it's good to have angels come out of nowhere to help suppress enemy fire," he said.

Today's sailors have also been instructed by Vietnam vets to carry extra ammunition, said Cmdr. Bill Guarini, 39.

"It's fun stuff: going 40 knots on the water, shooting the best weapons," Guarini said. "We're all outdoorsy people. It's exciting, plus there's a sense that you're doing something special."

Petty Officer 2nd Class Tyson Carter, 25, recently completed combat training with Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C. It was hot and humid, and he loved it. He'll be a gunner on a Navy patrol boat.

"It's all about the adrenaline," said Carter of Choctaw, Okla. "We're taking the fight to the enemy."

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