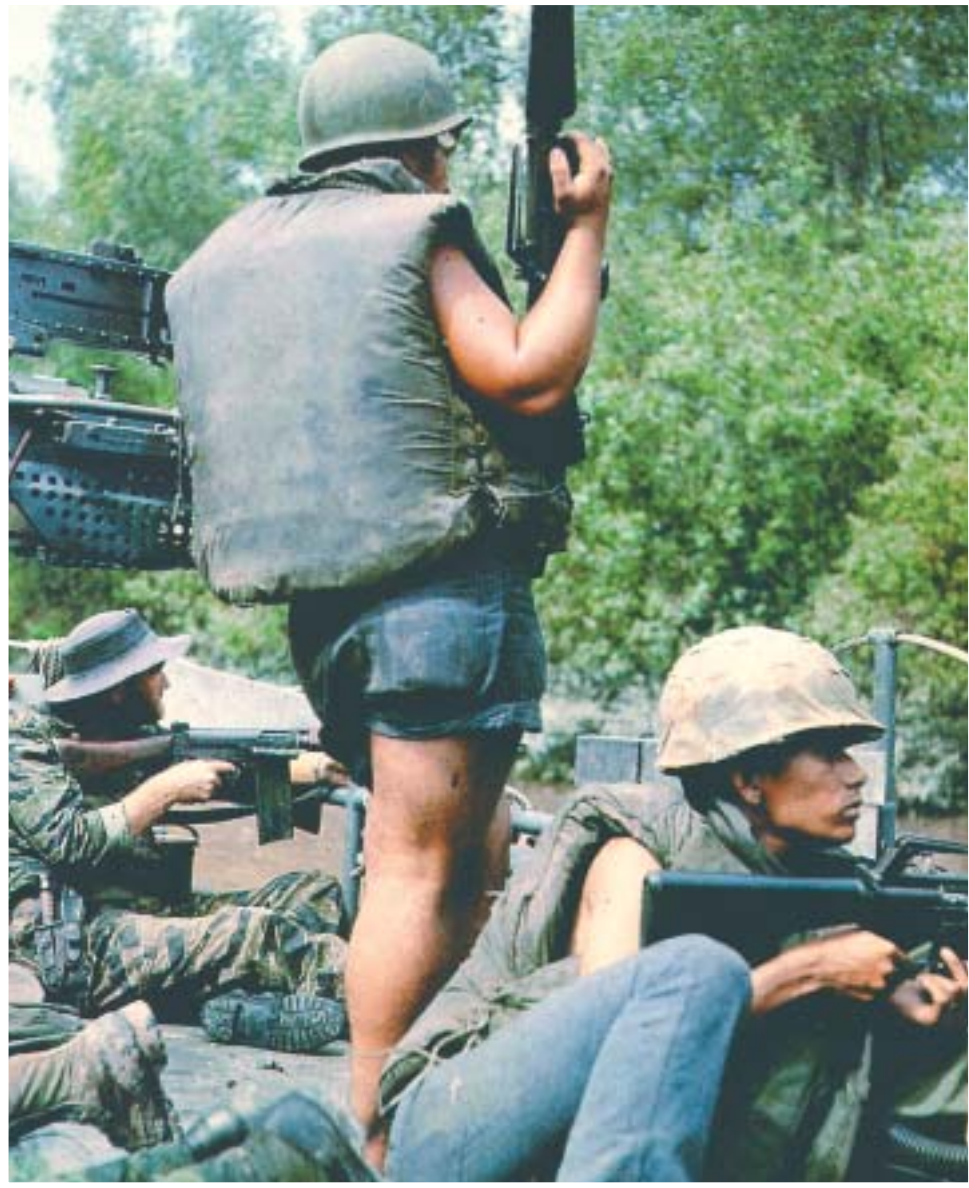


CDT VIETNAM 69-70

Story by J H Farrell, Pics by Fred Adler and Tony Ey

BROWN WATER WAR





**Above: US Special Forces and SVN RF/PF troops are dropped off short of the objective to secure the canal banks from VC during the CDT Op.
Below: CDT SLR/AR complete with 40mm CGL and marinised heavy barrel.**



Below: CDT3 Divers board SVN Navy Patrol Boat Rivers (PBRs) in I Corps.



THE Royal Australian Navy divers of Clearance Diving Team 3 have made a reputation for themselves as class operators in both the Second Gulf War and in East Timor, but the unit's baptism of fire in Vietnam was many times more dramatic than both of the later conflicts combined.

CDT3 earned its first stripes in Vietnam emerging as one of the most highly decorated and least publicised Australian units to have fought against the Communist take over in South Vietnam.

Bare foot, clad in mud stained tiger or leaf cam, and armed with the latest in experimental small arms, the divers of CDT 3 took the war to Victor Charlie and his North Vietnamese Army comrades in Australia's own brown water war.

FIRST A LITTLE HISTORY

South Vietnam is one of the wettest places on earth. The monsoon rains of the wet season wash away the best sealed roads and dirt tracks are impassable slush for five months of the year.

A practical people, the Vietnamese had long ago given up fighting the inevitable rains and turned the abundance of rivers and tributaries to their advantage, making these waterways the basis of an effective communications system.

The Colonial French learned the score quickly too, bringing in their engineers and building a vast network of canals between the natural waterways. This opened up the fertile plains of the Mekong, Red and Perfume river deltas for agriculture and turned the sleepy coastal areas of Indo China into one of the great rice bowls of the world.

From the very beginning of hostilities against the Japanese in the 1940s, the canal systems became the focus of fierce fighting with both the occupying Japanese and the Viet Minh (the forerunner to the Viet Cong) forcefully contesting the control of these economically vital systems.

With the defeat of the Japanese and the return of the French, the battle for the waterways began again. The bullets were still flying when the Royal Australian Navy entered the fray in February 1967 and the first divers of Clearance Diving Team 3 arrived at Vung Tau.

CLEARANCE DIVING TEAM 3

Although the Vietnam War has been described primarily as a land and air conflict, all strategic supplies were dependent on a predictable arrival of supplies by surface shipping.

Limpet mines laid by determined groups of VC swimmer sappers were causing all sorts of headaches for the Free World Forces with many ships damaged or sunk by the Soviet made mines and the gutsy Communist cadres.

To counter this threat, the RAN initially deployed Clearance Diving Team 1 in 1965 and altered the diving training program to suit the combat environment in South Vietnam.

The RAN's divers had traditionally trained for salt water ops in support of the surface fleet – ship and anchorage protection, mine clearance and EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal). But in Vietnam the divers would encounter many new threats, far from the clear and cold ocean.

Because of the high demand for CDTs with the home fleet, the RAN decided to raise a third Clearance Diving Team (CDT Three) for service in Vietnam.

Competition for selection for active service was intense. The chance to work in a live environment was rare and no one wanted to miss out. Intensive fitness, small arms and intelligence training was conducted by all members of the Clearance Diving Branch after which teams of eight were selected.

The eight were then put into full scale combat preparation including completion of the Army's famous close country warfare school at the then Jungle Training Centre at Canungra. Only six of the eight were then selected for Vietnam (one Officer and five Other Ranks), the other two were held back as replacements in the advent of casualties.

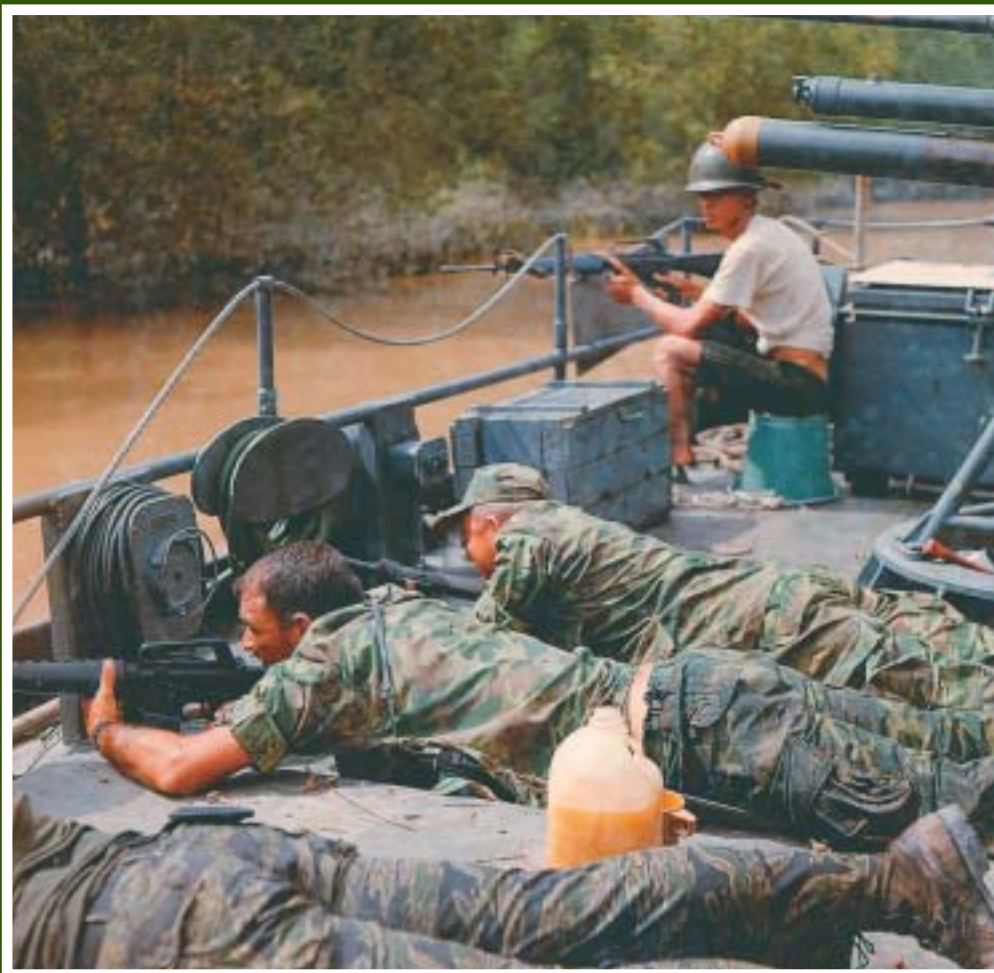
IN COUNTRY

On arrival 'In Country' in February 1967 Clearance Diving Team 3 was based in a series of ramshackle hootches at the Harbour Entrance Central Post (VC Hill) in the Nui Lon area of Vung Tau.

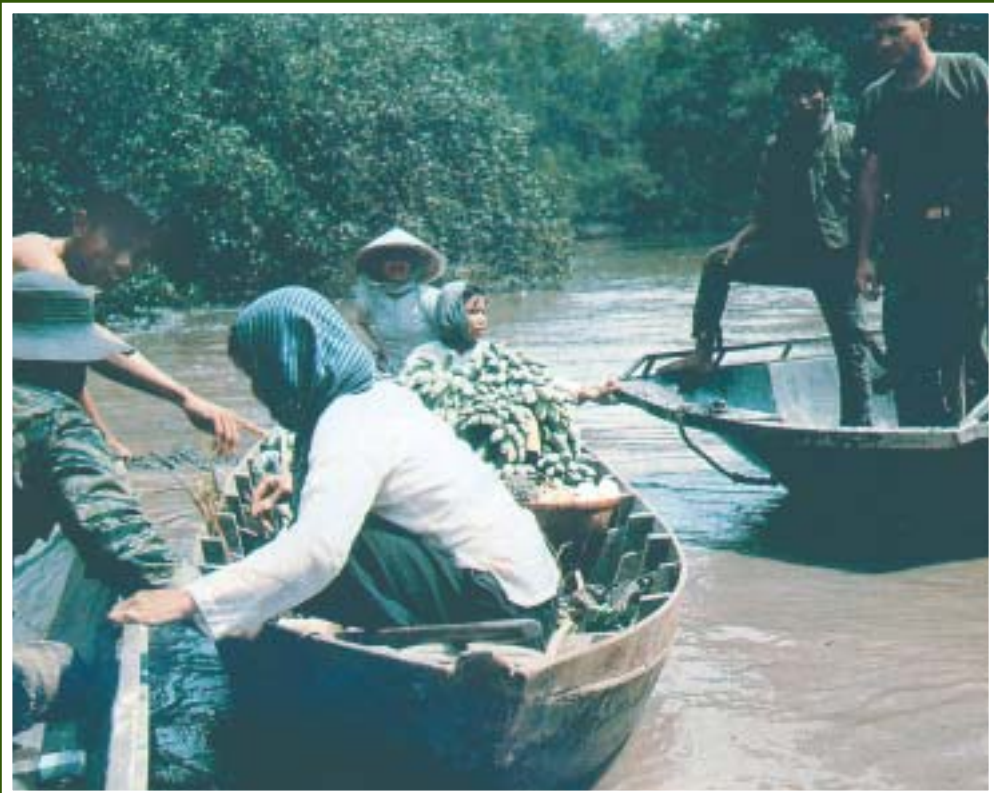
From their position on VC Hill the Clearance Divers had a commanding view of their primary area of responsibility – Vung Tau Harbour down to Long Son Island.

The Harbour had few facilities with ships anchoring offshore and unloading via a fleet of landing craft that took the cargo directly to the beach.

"Our primary role at Vung Tau was ship protection. The biggest threat was diver laid mines," said Alec Donald Officer Commanding of the sixth rotation during 1969/70. "We went out every night into the harbour. The tidal streams in Vung



Above: The Team watch for VC on the Song Hau Giang - the PBFs were often ambushed. Below: CDT3 members intercept Vietnamese civilians who blundered into the Op area.





Mixed Aussie/US Navy/Vietnamese Navy team in a skimmer set up a blocking position as CDT3 divers hit the barricade.

Tau are very swift and we normally conducted our patrol two hours before and two hours after slack water.”

“We were required to check all vessels for mines. We checked anchor chains in case a mine or other device had been attached to them. The tidal stream would then drag the charge back alongside the hull, which would detonate the mine magnetically. Alternately the attack swimmer would place a limpet mine directly against the hull and leave it there with a timing mechanism.”

CDT contingent 6 didn’t find any charges attached to ships during their tour, but both contingent 5 and contingent 7 did including the sophisticated Soviet BPM mine.

As well as providing sea mine countermeasures and ship protection, the Clearance Divers were tasked to assist Allied Forces in Phuoc Tuy Province with any EOD tasks required. EOD jobs varied from disposing of dangerous or damaged ammunition through to destruction of bunker systems, tunnel complexes, unexploded bombs and booby traps (Improvised Explosive Devices or IEDs).

One of CDT3’s most unusual finds was an improvised VC water mine made from a 500lb aircraft bomb with a water proof housing used to destroy riverine patrol boats and useful for dealing with CDT and US Navy UDTs trying to clear VC canal barricades.

BARRICADES AND BUNKERS

While the salt water work around Vung Tau continued to occupy at least half of the Team at any one time, the Aussies soon discovered that the real yakka was to be found in the brown water of South Vietnam’s river and canal systems.

The VC recognised the importance of the waterways to the South’s economy and security and went to great efforts to make Government and

peasant use of the rivers as dangerous as possible while developing them as part of their own supply and mobility systems.

Well constructed VC bunker systems controlled many waterways and major caches of supplies and weapons were stored close to water.

Destroying this infrastructure and keeping the canals open became the job of CDT3 and their US Navy mates which saw the Bubbly become true Mud Soldiers.

“We did a lot of things we couldn’t put in our reports,” Alec Donald confessed. “As OIC, I was not authorised to go into an ambush, or assault a VC held position or take part in a search and destroy sweep, but all of these things happened during CDT3’s time in Vietnam.”

Armed with a variety of weapons ranging from highly modified ‘jacked up’ L1A1 SLRs fitted with 40mm grenade launchers, XM-148s under and overs and even early model CAR-15/M-203 under and overs, the Clearance Divers took to the dangerous business of search and destroy with gusto. Using local South Vietnamese guides, the CDTs were soon destroying tunnels and bunkers with excess amounts of PE.

THE DELTA

The mighty Mekong River, the greatest of all Southeast Asia’s waterways, breaks into a hundred tributaries as it reaches the South China Sea in what we know as the Delta. The Delta was a hotbed of VC activity and a vital supply route for the revolutionary war in the South and eventually CDT 3 was called in to assist in the fight for the area.

In February 1970, recon photos and reports from US and SVN riverine units in the area of Dung Island (the largest of the Delta’s inhabited island and as shitty as its name suggests) had identified two small and one large probably booby trapped log barricades blocking an important canal off the Song Hau Giang, the southern most tributary of the Mekong River on



Above: Two Patrol Boat Rivers await a CDT3 crew for riverine Ops near the DMZ. Note early model 40mm grenade launchers, flex mounted M-60s and M-2s and 81mm mortar. Below: A US Navy EOD Petty Officer directs the laying of the Mark 8 hose charges on the Song Hau Giang.

the boundary of Vinh Binh and Ba Xuyen Provinces.

The job was handed over to the Aussie Clearance Divers. Three RAN Divers - Lt Alec Donald (in command of the overall operation), POCD Bill Bailey and LS 'Tex' Bullock were joined by seven US Navy EOD Techs from the 35th Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit commanded by PO Norm Garron dragged their gear aboard a US Army CH-47C Chinook in the early hours of 15 Feb, 1970.

After a short flight the combined RAN/USN team arrived at the USN's Coastal Group 36 base on the Son Hau Giang near Long Phu where they RVed with three gunned up Patrol Boat Fasts (PBFs) and Coast Guard Cutters of the US Navy's Coastal Surveillance Group.

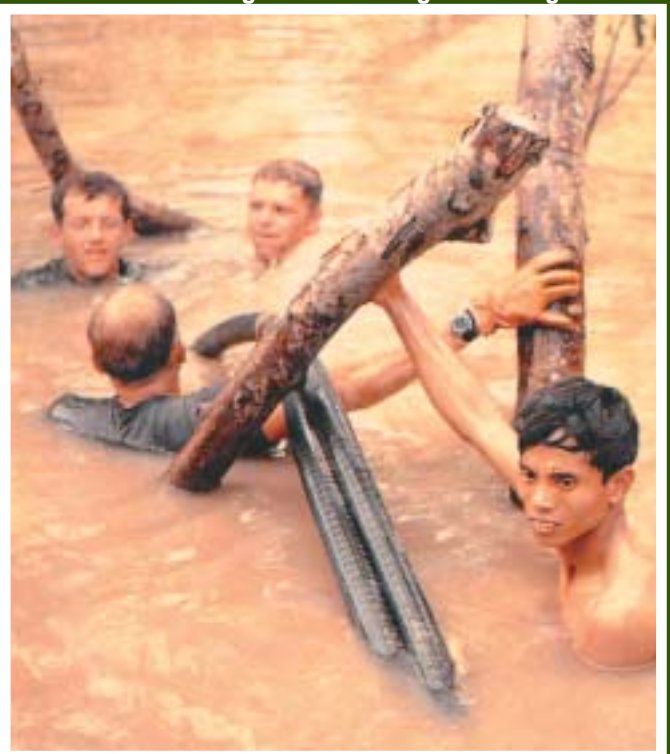
Donald, or 'Tigerman' as he was nicknamed on account of his penchant for wearing a dirty set of faded 'tiger stripe' combat fatigues and a battered Navy KFF hat, was no stranger to canal Ops. His team's first major activity had been the clearance of an almost identical obstacle in the Bassac River in 1969 and in the meantime he and his team had grown familiar with Charlie's brown water tricks.

While the blowing of canal obstacles was routine, as professionals the CDTs left nothing to chance.

One hundred South Vietnamese Popular and Regional Force troops under the command of US Special Forces Sgt J Mancini were dropped into the area to provide a secure perimeter in the thick Nipa palm shrouded banks.

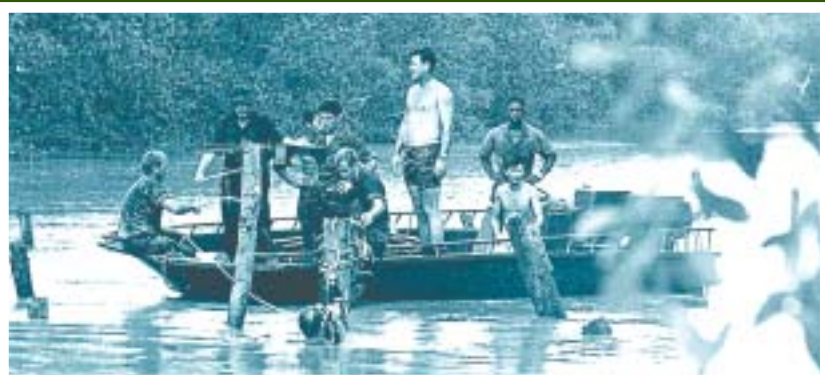
Air support was provided by two US Army mini-gun armed OH-6 light observation helicopters piloted by Captain Bob Hoffman and his offsider Captain Raab.

Hoffman, an ex-AH-1 Cobra gunship driver, had worked with the divers on many previous occasions and was well respected by the Bubbles





Above: CDT3 and US and SVN EOD teams prepare detonators for Mark 8 hose charges for use at a barricade. Left: CDT Tex Bullock wires det cord to a Mark 8 hose while OIC Donald looks on. It took an extraordinary amount of explosive to lift the makeshift VC barricades. Below: CDT3 and US and SVN EOD teams prepare an earlier barricade for demolition in 1969.



who reckoned he was a good hand to have aboard when the bullets started flying. Hoffman also dug the CDT's laid back approach and would fly his little helo with Mk 8 charges and det cord wrapped around skids without complaint. Rumour also has it that Hoffman taught some of the CDTs to fly the OH-6 during off hours - you can't imagine that in today's ADF.

THE SONG HAU GIANG

At CG36, the Divers transferred their Mk 8 Demolition Hose Charges (a PE filled heavy duty hose with threads at either end to any enable any number to be joined together), weapons and special equipment to the Yank PBFs for the trip up the Song Hau Giang.

The Song Hau Giang was almost a klick wide at the point of departure so the multi-national team of brown water warriors had a moment to relax and suck a smoke in the relative safety of midstream.

The river soon narrowed and all aboard the PBFs took cover, their assorted weapons trained on the treeline. The US Navy gunners behind the PBF's .50 cal's scanned the jungle ready to respond to any ambush with a hail of fire.

Many US and SVN patrol boats had been ambushed in the area, with the VC launching B-40 rockets and HMG fire from well sited bunkers in the thick undergrowth. Prudence was the best option – no one wanted to go home in a box.

Because of the size of the force, the local VC cadre also decided prudence was the order of the day and let the small flotilla arrive at the barricades unmolested.

Sgt Mancini and his PF/RF boys were dropped short of the first objective and melted into the Nipa palms. The VC were not fools and were highly professional and most likely they had their obstacle covered with fire. Mancini's task was to secure the canal banks and push forward ambush teams to protect the Navy specialists.

The CDTs and EOD Techs jumped in outboard powered skimmers (tinnies) and cautiously approached the first obstacle – a double 10 metre wide by three metre deep structure of about 60 20cm cross braced tree trunks that straddled the canal. The VC carved the logs like a drill bit so they could be screwed and hammered into the mud. The entire structure was protected with barbed wire and pungti stakes.

There was every chance that the entire structure was booby trapped. The local VC were adept at making 'water mines' using unexploded bombs and artillery shells – so a thorough search was made for trip wires and booby traps.

With the all clear, the mixed Navy team hit the water, lacing the obstacle with 12 Mark 8 Hose Charges. The Mk 8 can be primed at either end and screwed together making them a very flexible explosive.

Tex Bullock connected the lot up with instantaneous det cord and with the area cleared, the nearly 200kg of PE was command detonated – blowing water and barricade more than 100 metres in the air.

When the air cleared there was no trace of the first 'fence' and the three PBFs were able to negotiate through the unblocked canal to the main obstacle which lay beyond.

"The next barricade was more impressive," Alec Donald remembered, "it was some 70 metres in length and five in width. Approximately 300 vertical members were secured to the canal bed with the usual interlocking cross members, barbed wire and punji stakes."

Once again the area was secured, checked for IEDs and enemy forces before the demolition team moved in.

Many times larger than the smaller fence, the big barricade required a lot more work to move. Fifty-two MK 8 Hose Charges were linked together carrying a total of more than 1000Kgs of PE. When Alec shot the charge the blast was terrific – blowing the whole structure to matchsticks.

With the job done, it was time to bolt. The activities of the RAN CDTs and USN EOD underwater demolition teams had undone thousands of VC man-hours of effort. It would have been foolish to hang around long enough to let the enemy extract some pay back.

It was all just one small act in a very big war, but as the accompanying photos attest, the CDTs worked a very different job compared with the Digs operating out of Nui Dat.

No doubt the VC would have replaced the entire structure within two or three months as was their way, but by then the Divers of Clearance Diving Team 3 and their US counterparts of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit Team No 35 had moved from their southern base at Vung Tau to Da Nang far to the north in Military Region 1.

The Delta's problems became the responsibility of South Vietnamese Navy EOD units and eventually was fully controlled by Communist forces.

DA NANG & RTA

By late 1970, enemy activity in Phuoc Tuy and Vung Tau Harbour had quietened down a fair bit due to the effectiveness of 1st Australian Task Force's pacification program. The Australians still had major battles to fight but they were more often than not either in neighbouring Provinces or on the very edge of Phuoc Tuy near the border with Long Khanh.

During the previous three years the Clearance Diving Teams' effectiveness had caught the eye of the US Navy who requested that the CDT3 team deploy north to Da Nang in I Corps just south of the DMZ along with the rest of EOD Mobile Unit No 35 who were called forward as the war progressed.

Da Nang was an entirely different game to Phuoc Tuy. It was all out conventional war fought mostly by NVA regulars not VC farm boys and the odd advisor. The only other Australians in the vicinity were the advisors of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) who were also based in the city.

Attached to a US Navy formation that supplied them, the CDT3 members wore US issue leaf cammo and were armed with USN issue Colt 1911A1 .45 pistols and the CAR-15 Colt Commando and ate US Navy food.

The CDT3 rotation in I Corps was a torrid time, with the Divers roaming the length and breadth of I Corps cleaning up dangerous materials and even spending time out bush with AATTV Advisors and their ARVN units until the unit was withdrawn from the conflict in April 1971.

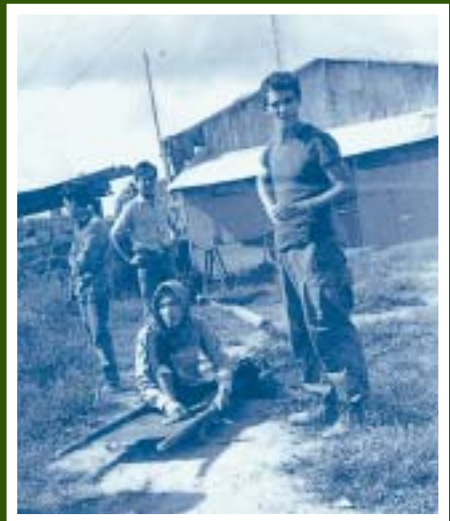
The CDT3 experiences in I Corps will be covered in an upcoming A & NZD feature.

On return to Australia, Clearance Diving Team 3 was disbanded and the Divers returned to fleet support duties with Teams One and Two Clearance Diving Teams, and was not reformed until the Second Gulf War broke out in 1990 –

18 years later.



Above: Viet Cong weapons captured by CDT3 during riverine Ops: including an M-14, M-1As, .38 S&W revolver, M-3s greaseguns, .45 Thompson SMG, PPSH, Type 56 AKs and an RPG-7.
Right: A Viet Cong prisoner awaits his fate at CDT3's temporary compound at Dung Island.



Above: The CDT's OH-6 chopper prepares to cover the Op.
Below: US Navy Patrol Boat Fast (Swiftboats) in support.

