

**Sinking June 67 of an LST Leads to a Visit with the Navy's Top Admiral
Cau Viet, Republic of Vietnam
By Dan McDonald – Decemer 2016**

It was sometime after midnight in June of 1967 at Cua Viet when we were awoken suddenly by an explosion. It wasn't incoming artillery or rockets, as we were all too familiar with those sounds by this time; it was a sound much deeper and an explosion much more powerful. The explosion was followed almost immediately by the in-port ship's PA system blaring orders for all hands to report to General Quarters - the Navy's universal call to ready a ship for emergency or battle. Clearly something was amiss.

I put on my flak jacket, helmet and boots and all of us Seabees went to the top of the ramp to see what was going on and to see if we could help. It turned out the ship was "buttoned up" so all we could do was watch and standby because we couldn't get aboard. The ramp was the area that we Seabees were building and it was raised about 12 ft above our compound, separating us from the waterfront operation. From the top of the ramp we observed what was happening, and I must have been an odd sight in full combat gear complete with .45 pistol strapped on, standing there in my skivvy shorts. However, I'm sure nobody noticed as we were all kind of busy at the time.

The Ramp at Cua Viet, Republic of Vietnam (RVN) – Jul67



- 1) Landing Ship Tank (LST) in port with LCU off its starboard bow
- 2) This is not the ship that was sunk, but almost identical to it
- 3) The barge & crane at top of picture were off-loading gravel to build the staging area

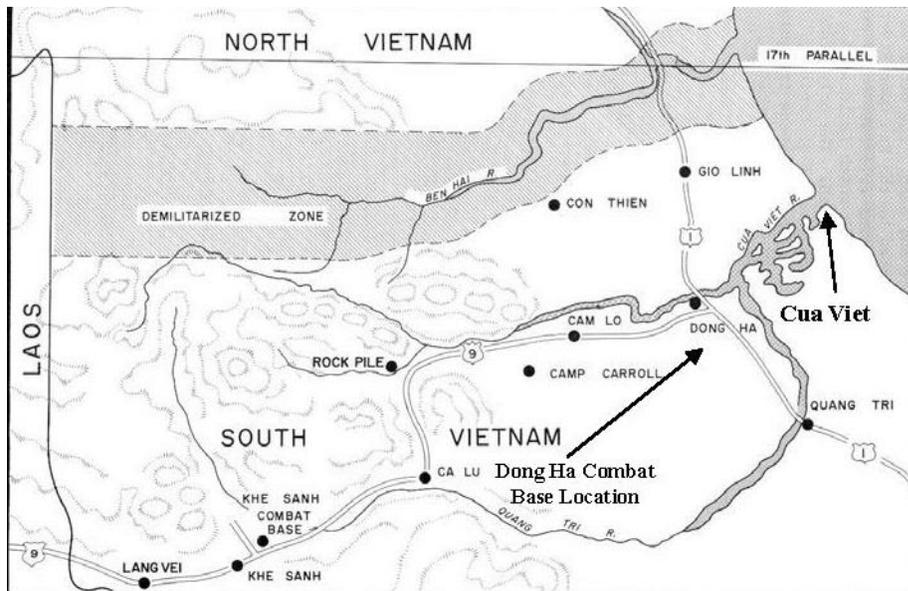
When we arrived at the top of the ramp the LST's port side was in full sight. Almost immediately a huge explosion erupted amidships directly in front of me sending a gigantic geyser of water at least fifty feet into the air. The ship shuddered violently and the onboard lights flickered as its emergency generators struggled to take over for the ship's disabled main generator. From my vantage point I saw crew members running on the main deck to their battle stations as the lights flickered on and off. This gave the scene a surreal quality and if this hadn't been real life, it would have looked like a scene from a B-grade movie. To my total disbelief, within just a few minutes, this 4,000 ton ship listed to port and sank.

The river bottom was only 4 to 5 feet below the keel and the LST hit bottom with a jolt but started to list badly to port. By this time all hands were at their battle stations and hatches were closed, sealing off the damaged area, and the emergency pumping system was fully activated, furiously pumping out the water which threatened to capsize the vessel. Slowly the ship began to right its self. This entire drama unfolded within approximately 15 - 20 minutes.

What we had just witnessed was a successful NVA underwater demolition team (UDT) operation. It was designed to cripple this port facility, the key link in the supply system for the entire northern defenses of South Vietnam, the so-called "McNamara Line". See map below. Underwater sappers had placed two magnetic mines on the port side of the ship and these had blown a hole in the bottom of the hull, destroyed the engine room and instantly killing the entire crew on duty there.

My Seabee unit, USNMCB 11, was located at Dong Ha Combat Base and the detachment that I was part of had been sent to build the ramp at Cua Viet. Our Battalion's leadership knew that this was a critical facility and that it was vulnerable. Only a small part of this critical ramp was useable at that time - the dark area in front of the bow of the LST in the above picture. The rest of the ramp was under construction, but unusable at the time of this picture and the time of the attack.

Strategically by this operation, the NVA could block the use of the ramp at Cua Viet by sinking this ship there, and forcing most ammunition, food and other supplies to be brought by truck convoy over the Hai Van Pass from Da Nang. U.S.



Northern I Corps – Republic of Vietnam

This line of bases from Lang Vei to Gio Linh was called the “McNamara Line” for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, its designer

forces were in deep trouble. That mountainous pass was an extremely vulnerable area and one successful attack on a convoy would easily cripple the entire supply line to the Northern I Corps. The northern defenses of South Vietnam were in jeopardy and everyone knew it.

That’s why at dawn the next morning it seemed the entire United States Navy descended on our little corner of the world. Ship repair crews from the Philippines arrived in droves by helicopter. To avoid NVA follow-up, their mission was to patch the holes in this crippled ship and get it the heck out of there by sundown. And about 1600 the ship was pulled off the ramp, stern-first by a large, sea-going tug which had **just** arrived at Cua Viet from the Philippines. Mission accomplished.

The only comic relief in this drama was brought by a small curious duck. Said duck had been swimming around the bow of the ship most of the afternoon viewing this strange activity. It seemed interested in all the commotion, especially the unusual, huge object at the center of the activity. As the LST was being pulled off the ramp, stern first, to begin its journey to the Philippines the duck saw its chance; it swam to the bow and climb up on the ramp that had been opened by the crew that day and curiously left in its open position. As the ship disappeared out into the South China Sea the duck remained happily perched there enjoying the ride while the ship went out of sight. I have often wondered if the duck made it all the way to Subic Bay and if so, how a Vietnamese duck would get on in a Philippine port.

The Admiral's Visit - A Sequel to This Story



Cua Viet's strategic significance was emphasized to us by: 1) Frequent artillery and rocket attacks, 2) The Jun-67 NVA Underwater Demolition Team's (UDT) sinking of an LST to bottle up the port described above and 3) A very reliable source, the then-Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Thomas Moorer himself.

Here is my account of events surrounding Admiral Moorer's Jul-67 visit to Cua Viet a month after the sinking and what I learned from him some 33 years later about the reasons for that visit.

Cua Viet was the most vulnerable point on our main supply route for all ammunition, food and other supplies for the entire Northern I Corps area. The significance of Cua Viet was not lost on the NVA. On the ground we were reminded of that almost daily and it was confirmed to me personally, many years later by Admiral Moorer, who in July 1967 was the brand new Chief of Naval Operations and would later become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In mid-July 67 we were surprised at Cua Viet to receive a radio message that within the hour, CNO himself was coming to visit us and wanted to be briefed by us! This was surprising because Cua Viet at that time was an end-of-the-world enclave of two companies of Marines, approximately twenty Naval Support Activity personnel and by the then thirty Seabee of our MCB-11 detachment. We at Cua Viet were surrounded by sea, river, concertina wire and enemy. About an hour later, 3 Hueys came in, one landed and a 4-star Admiral immersed from it!

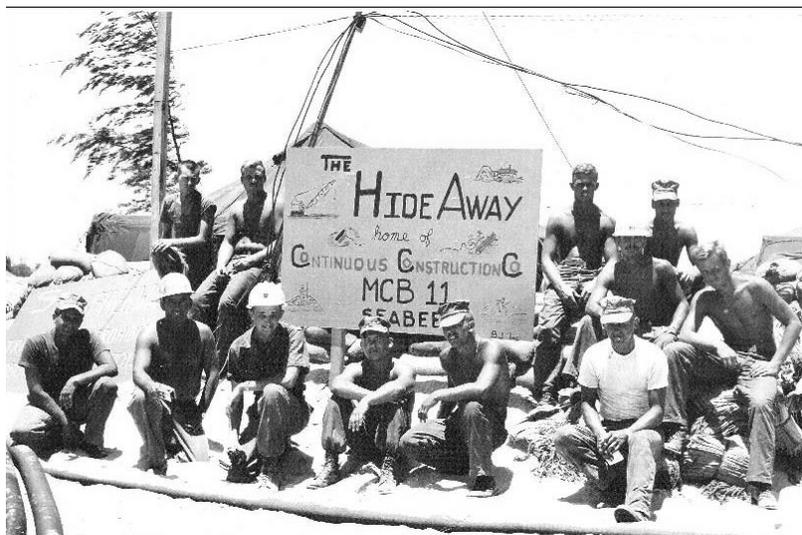
As an Ensign, I remember I was the 3rd ranking officer in the briefing meeting for the Admiral. This was not the place that anyone wanted to visit, but visit Cua Viet CNO did. It was the greatest act of gutsy leadership that I have ever experienced - to have the highest ranking officer in the Navy be in-country and come into harm's way to see us and care about us was a morale boost beyond words for me and all the men there.

Over thirty years later, I was part of a discussion in a group about acts of leadership that we had experienced during our lives and I related the above story. After that telling, I resolved to attempt to thank the Admiral personally for his

visit. I searched out his contact information and thanked him in a faxed letter.....he responded by phone almost immediately! Admiral Moorer thanked me for my note and invited me to come see him if I was ever in Bethesda, Maryland. About a year later I was on a trip to DC and I did just that.

On the occasion of my visit in early 2000, as I was leaving his home, I asked if he remembered coming to Cua Viet that day in July 1967. When he said that he did, I asked, "Why were you there, Admiral?" He related that the Navy had just received top secret satellite photos that showed NVA forces massing huge amounts of armor just north of Cua Viet and they reasoned that the enemy was planning an attack to overrun our position. Admiral Moorer and his people were there to personally assess the situation and determine how to blunt the NVA attack.

He then gave me what I took to be his supreme compliment, given his position as head of all Naval/Marine forces when at Cua Viet and later of all United States military forces. He said, "Those of you who served at Cua Viet (and I would add Dong Ha) at that time can truly be called warriors"I will remember those words with pride always.





R to L Lower Row:

Me, Phillips CN,
MacLaughlin 3rd, Seitzenger
2nd

Upper Row: Keefer 2nd,
Grahm 3rd, Sturtz 2nd,
Harmon 2nd, Scalpi 2nd,
Sweeney 3rd

Note: from notes on picture,
missing EOC Edwards who
was on R&R at the time and
was the Ultimate Can Do
Seabee. In July the
Detachment was approx. 30

men, but we didn't take time for another photo – SHOOT!

Dan McDonald's Tour of Duty (ies):

I graduated from Naval Officer Candidate School in Aug66 and was sent to Civil Engineer Corps Officer's School in Port Hueneme in September. There I asked for and got assigned to a Seabee Battalion and after reporting to MCV 11 I was first assigned as Assistant Charlie Company Commander. Soon after MCB 11 got to Dong Ha Combat Base I was sent down-river to lead up the Detail in Cua Viet joining EOC Alva Edwards down there. At the first of Sep67 Cdr. Hartell made me Security Company Commander I took over that shortly after 3Sep67 and served in that capacity until the end of the Dong Ha Combat Base deployment. After returning to Port Hueneme I took over as Bravo Company Commander in Jan68, a position that I held from then and throughout the entire deployment to Quang Tri Combat Base. I finished my MCB-11 stint as Echo Detail Commander, the detachment that deployed to Okinawa when the rest of the Battalion went to Phu Bai in '69. I left active duty in Aug69.

In the early 1970's I worked construction building a downtown Seattle high-rise and then turned of design engineering in fisheries, water and wastewater facilities. While not combat, I enlisted in the civilian world's equivalent when I ran for and won a seat in the Washington State Legislature. I was Ways and Means Chairman for 5 years and Senate Majority Leader for 2. I hung up my hat after 24 years and didn't run for re-election in 2002.

Janie and I have two sons, two wonderful daughters-in-law and 6 wonderful

grandchildren. Since we were married 4 months to the day before I left for Dong Ha on 28 Apr 67 we celebrate our 50th anniversary coming up right after Christmas.