

# LEGACY OF VALOR: VIETNAM

*This is the fourth in a series of Shipmate features commemorating the service and sacrifice of U.S. Naval Academy alumni who served in the Vietnam War. These stories will be featured in print, on a dedicated webpage, on social media and in videos.*

*More than 40 alumni shared their stories to help further the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association & Foundation's Legacy of Valor series. For all who stood watch, we honor your service and will not forget.*



# DA NANG REPAIR FACILITY

## KEPT SHIPS IN FIGHTING SHAPE

**N**avy ingenuity was in demand and on full display during the Vietnam War.

In the absence of necessary supplies and relying on World War II surplus equipment, the Small Craft Repair Facility (SCRF) in Da Nang kept the U.S. Navy's harbor craft and lighterage boats running and lent a helping hand to the other service branches. Coastal shipping from Da Nang was used to reach locations near the DMZ, Cua Viet, Tan My, Chu Lai and Sa Huynh, due to the difficulties and hazards of land convoys.

Captain Richard Kell '63, USN (Ret.), spent a year in Da Nang as SCRF's executive officer beginning in the fall of 1967. He said the facility, and its 500-person crew, was responsible for repairing all types of vessels.

The facility could handle up to 10 boats at a time. The crew worked 12-hour shifts and repaired hundreds of vessels per year as they endured extreme heat and frequent downpours during the rainy season. Their assignments weren't confined to watercraft, Kell said.

One day, an Army tank rolled up into the SCRF layout yard. The Army turned to the

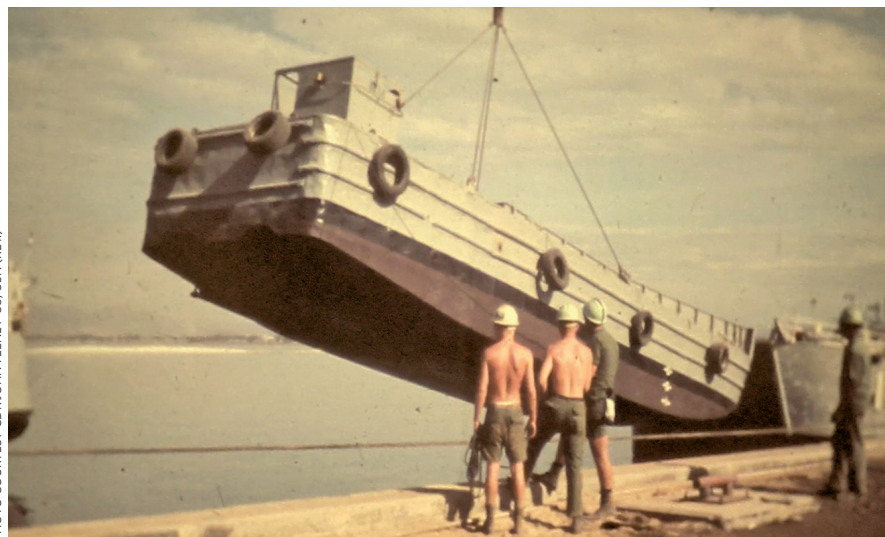
Navy to help install a guard around the turret base to the tank body. Tank turrets were vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) hitting just below the turret and just above the tank body where the turret column rotated. Cyclone fencing can stop an RPG as it lodges in fence weaving and detonates, without causing any damage to the tank.

"We designed and put one on, that rotated with the turret," Kell said. "The captain said he had a few more and could we do the mod on those? The next day 'a few' turned out to be 20-plus tanks we ended up fixing."

The SCRF was responsible for the uninterrupted operation of everything that floated in I Corps at Naval Support Activity Da Nang. They repaired yard oilers, tankers, barges, landing craft and utility craft. Their duties also included floating cranes, the lighterage craft, the harbor support-craft, the harbor security craft all of the private company lighterage and their harbor support craft and any ship from any friendly nation operating in the area that had a problem. There were more than 100 boats and craft with more than 400

An aerial view of the Da Nang Small Craft Repair Facility in Vietnam. What started as a floating dock evolved in the late 1960s into a fully functioning facility that could handle up to 10 craft at a time and had a 700-person crew.

PHOTO COURTESY CDR JOHN FEENEY '58, USN (RET.)



The Da Nang Small Craft Repair Facility ran 24 hours a day with sailors working 12-hour shifts. They used cranes to pull boats out of the water and return them after being repaired.

diesel engines and more than 1,000 pieces of operating equipment floating on the rivers.

In addition to Navy personnel, it was supported by about 250 local Vietnamese workers and about 120 Korean machine shop personnel. It began as a floating facility in 1966 but with then-Lieutenant Commander Tom Seigenthaler '54, USN (Ret.), serving as officer in charge (1967-68), the site blossomed with a pier, a repair barge, a diving barge, a floating dry dock, four shop buildings and a supply building.

They also maintained emergency repair shops in four locations from Hue City to Cua Viet.

"When I left there after a year, we were basically all ashore," said Seigenthaler, who retired as a rear admiral in 1988. "It was far from a small craft facility. It was close to a Navy shipyard at that time. It was working beautifully well and the people that were out there were fantastic. They were out there working 365 days a year."

Commander John Feeney '58, USN (Ret.), served as an engineering duty officer at Da Nang in 1969. He said the operations at the repair facility were similar to what he was doing in the shipyard stateside after his deployment to Vietnam.

One difference was the dearth of parts, supplies and machinery in Vietnam. If a specialized piece was needed to repair a boat, that often meant cannibalizing a part from

another vehicle or crafting something suitable from materials that could be salvaged.

Desperation met innovation as sailors did whatever was necessary to get ships back to the fleet. Actions that would've been frowned upon at a Navy yard 5,000 miles away—such as cutting up an anchor to carve a needed part—were standard operating procedures in Da Nang.

"In a very austere area, it's not like you go to the next yard and get the part you need," Feeney said. "The upside of doing all of that is you don't have a big bureaucracy. We would do things on our own."

"This is the stuff that really keeps the Navy together. There was nothing heroic or courageous it was just hard work."

## CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Sand roads were a problem at the repair facility. Whipping wind would create sandstorms and could make life miserable for those working at the SCRF.

The Navy also had problems with bilge oil. That byproduct could not be discharged into the bay so it had to be transported across the entrance of the harbor to be dumped in the sea.

One solution solved two problems. Feeney credited sailors for crafting the plan to pour the bilge oil on the sand roads. A tanker was built and bilge oil was pumped into the tanker. They then used a cart to distribute it around the facility.

"That was creative," Feeney said. "You adapt to what you have."

Kell said success at SCRF depended on that adaptability. He said a nearby salvage yard was a reliable resource for the repair facility crew to locate items to repurpose.

"They would go through the salvage yard and say, 'we need that,'" Kell said. "They'd throw it on the truck and you drove off."

By scavenging, the sailors were able to keep the steady rotation of repair jobs moving forward. Sometimes those parts would find their way into projects that brought unexpected rewards.

Kell said one morning he arrived at the facility and a Marine lowboy was sitting in the parking lot. A lowboy resembles a flatbed trailer and was used to carry heavy equipment, including bulldozers and helicopters.

Checking on why it was there, Kell found out that a few days before, some Marines showed up in the Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (AC&R) shop with a broken room AC unit.

"Room air conditioners were prized above all else," Kell said. "My guys knew that and had fixed a lot of them. The lowboy was the swap for a repaired A/C unit. The lowboy was discreetly returned that evening."

Seigenthaler said his crew received a sweet deal from Army personnel needing motorboat repairs.

He told the soldiers his men could overhaul the Army's electric outboard motors.

In turn, the Navy folks received milk and ice cream.

"Everybody took care of each other," Seigenthaler said.

## REPURPOSED FOR THE MISSION

Untouched welding equipment, lathes, hand tools, a 24-inch horizontal boring mill and motor rewinding machines were pulled from wooden crates stenciled with "Navy Repair

**Necessity was the mother of invention at the Da Nang Small Craft Repair Facility during the Vietnam War. The facility's roads were sand and wind would create sandstorms. Sailors suggested dampening the roads with bilge oil, which neutralized much of the dusty conditions.**



PHOTO COURTESY: CDR JOHN FEENEY '58, USN (RET.)



Facility-Medium, Production Board.” Kell said there was no information of what was inside each crate when they arrived in Vietnam. These machines were part of a kit originally intended to be used to build ship repair capabilities in the Pacific Islands during World War II.

The war was over before they could be used so they were placed in storage until 1967.

“There were probably 50 huge boxes in a big sand pile,” Seigenthaler said. “They used the equipment, and it operated perfectly well.”

“We had a piece of equipment we didn’t know what it was,” Kell said. “None of us could figure it out until a warrant electrician showed up. He looked at it and said, ‘Oh, that’s a radio frequency coil rewind machine.’ They were used in WWII to repair radios.

The dedicated efforts of the personnel at SCRF kept vital supplies moving in I Corps on a routine basis and ramped up support, when required, such as the effort to supply the fighting units during the TET offensive. ⚓



**The Da Nang Small Craft Repair Facility relied on Vietnamese and Korean workers who helped get boats back into the fleet.**

PHOTO COURTESY CDR JOHN FEENEY '58, USN (RET)

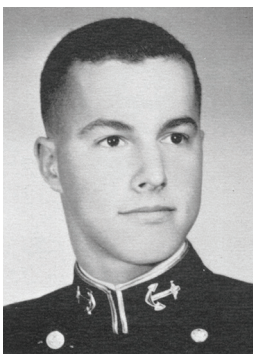
*Editor’s Note: As part of the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association & Foundation’s Legacy of Valor: Vietnam War series, Shipmate staff interviewed and solicited stories from alumni. We gathered stories from more than 40 alumni and are sharing them in the pages of Shipmate in 2025 and online by, scanning this QR code.*



# NOT FORGOTTEN

## ALUMNI VIETNAM EXPERIENCES

### GIL ZEMANSKY '65



*Zemansky served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1971, first on amphibious ships and then on PBRs (Patrol Boat Riverine).*

Most of my PBR operations were as an advisor to the Vietnamese navy. The first unit I was assigned to was split between Ha Tien on the Gulf of Thailand and Chau Doc on the Mekong River, and we patrolled mostly between the canals of those two on the Cambodian border and trying to interdict the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army infiltration routes.

I did that and one of the advantages I had in the situation was that I was the senior advisor to my counterpart, who was a lieutenant commander in the Vietnamese navy. When he

wasn’t there, I was his deputy. And, that gave me a command position.

We had a whole Vietnamese division and support from the Americans, a little bit of air support, but they were pulling air support out at the time. The operation I was involved in, before I rotated out of Vietnam, took about a year and a half before we fully controlled the U Minh Forest. It was a successful operation and mainly due to the Vietnamese Infantry Division, 21st Infantry Division.

They had a gung-ho major general in charge. He didn’t do things the way we did it in the military, but I have to say he was successful.

We would take Vietnamese army units in and position them on an assault. Things were going slowly and I was on a boat with our patrol boats trying to figure out why it was taking so long to get that unit aboard. At that time, the general in charge flew in on a helicopter. We didn’t hear exactly what he was saying. We could see him talking with the colonel in charge