

## International Journal of Naval History

---

December 2005

Volume 4 Number 3

Richard Knott. *Fire from the Sky: Seawolf Gunships in the Mekong Delta*. Annapolis, MD: The Naval Institute Press, 2005. Photos. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xiii + 260 pages.

Reviewed by John Darrell Sherwood

U.S. Naval Historical Center

---

The Vietnam War was the first conflict since the American Civil War where the U.S. Navy fought extensively along rivers. Riverine warfare demanded new technology and tactics, and the U.S. Navy responded to these challenges with remarkable rapidity. It quickly deployed a river patrol boat (PBR) based on a commercial design that drew only 9-18 inches of water and was powered by water jets. Fast and heavily armed with .50-caliber machine guns, the PBR proved very effective at interdicting enemy watercraft along the shallow tributaries of the Mekong River. The unarmored, fiberglass patrol boats, however, also turned out to be vulnerable to enemy firepower, especially machine guns and recoilless rifles. To protect the PBR force, the Navy developed the first and only light helicopter attack squadron in its history: the HA(L)-3 "Seawolves." Initially, these helicopters provided quick response close air support for the PBRs of Task Forces 116 and 117, but eventually their role expanded to include medical evacuation, special operations, and air support for friendly forces in the Mekong Delta requiring assistance.

*Fire from the Sky* traces the Navy's Vietnam experience with light attack helicopters from the deployment of two Hueys on a landing ship dock *Belle Grove* (LSD-2) in 1966 through the disestablishment of HA(L)-3 on 16 March 1972. A retired U.S. Navy officer, and former editor of *Naval Aviation News* magazine, the author has written

three other books on naval aviation topics, including a history of Navy Catalina patrol bombers in World War II.

In his acknowledgments, the author reveals he wrote this book as a Ramsey Fellow at the National Air & Space Museum, and benefited greatly from unit history records held by the Naval Historical Center's Aviation History Branch. He also interviewed numerous Seawolf veterans, including many of the unit's commanding and executive officers.

Given the author's substantive credentials and his access to oral history material, this reader expected a definitive history of the Seawolves—a book similar to Carol Reardon's recently published history of Naval Attack Squadron 75 in 1972, *Launch the Intruders* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005). In short, a book that blends operational history derived from an exhaustive examination of official documents with personal experiences gleaned from oral history. What I discovered was a book that contained some colorful descriptions of various actions, but not much else.

The Naval Historical Center recently declassified troves of documents on the activities of the Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV) and its subordinate units, including the records the River Patrol Force (TF-116) and the Mobile Riverine Force (TF-117). Knott never once refers to these documents, which include detailed action reports covering many the engagements chronicled in his book, as well as intelligence reports, monthly summaries, statistics, and other information useful for connecting HA(L)-3 to the broader war effort. Instead, he relies mainly on historical chronologies produced by HA(L)-3 and oral history to re-construct the unit's operations. As consequence, the book often struggles to place the activities of HA(L)-3 in a larger context. We learn a great deal about numerous small actions fought by helicopters and the derring-do of various pilots and door gunners but very little about how these efforts contributed to broader U.S. Navy operations such as Game Warden or Sea Lords. How effective were the Seawolves in protecting the PBRs and other small boats that plied the

dangerous waterways of the Mekong River Delta? Was HA(L)-3 a force multiplier or an expensive luxury redundant with other air assets in the region?

Lack of context and broader analysis aside, I thought this book, given its heavy reliance on oral history, would at least illuminate the institutional culture of the Seawolves. However, even the book's combat descriptions come across as pedestrian because of the author's failure to develop his characters more fully. Unlike Reardon, who probes deeply into her dramatis personae, even going so far as to interview spouses, Knott rarely provides insights into the social backgrounds or ideology of the men who fought in the Seawolves. The light attack helicopter mission is not a traditional role for a U.S. Navy pilot. It's one more commonly associated with the ground services. How did Navy pilots fare in this role and how did their unique backgrounds help or hinder them in this strange role?

As the U.S. Navy enters the fourth year of the Global War on Terrorism, the service is once again taking a look at non-traditional missions such as riverine warfare. It developed the SH-60R, "Strikehawk," in response to deficiencies in attack helicopter aviation identified in the First Gulf War. This new helicopter carries offensive and defensive weapons, including Hellfire Missiles and .50-caliber machine guns. A comprehensive operational history of HA(L)-3 is therefore needed to help the Navy's leadership develop effective doctrine for this new helicopter. Unfortunately, this book will neither satisfy Navy leaders nor scholars of the Vietnam War. Written primarily as a tribute to the HA(L)-3 and its veterans, readers will find some interesting accounts of small actions as told by the people who fought in them but little information of substance on the broader contribution made by this squadron to the Navy's overall war effort in Vietnam.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)