

Current conclusions about the FTB's Fire Missions during the Vietnam Deployment:

Shipmates:

Ed Teagle's thoughts:

In January 1966, the USS Fred T Berry DD-858 was deployed to the Far East, serving with the Seventh Fleet in the Vietnam area. During her deployment, the ship spent time in the South China Sea and Gulf of Tonkin doing escort duty for the USS HANCOCK (CVA-19), USS ENTERPRISE (CVN-65) and USS ORISKANY (CVA-34). The Berry entered the Vietnam combat zone for the first time on March 10th. She was there to provide naval gunfire support (NGFS) for the allied ground forces in the Mekong and Saigon River Delta areas of South Vietnam.

Shipmate Al Thomas, ET2, 1965-1966, wrote an article for inclusion in the USS Fred T Berry history, he relates many events that occurred during his time on board, and gives an insight to his activities while on the Berry. The Berry was assigned to provide Naval Gun Fire Support (NGFS) to our soldiers and marines on land fighting the enemy. Al wrote of one of these support missions which was an urgent, emergency request from a US Marine Group: *"One day while working with the ENTERPRISE, she and the BERRY were called on a rescue mission for a group of Marines who were pinned down by V.C. We arrived on scene quite a while after the "Big E" and began immediate gun support. To do this, we had to go up the Saigon River."*

A group of US Marines in battle with Viet Cong soldiers were in danger of being overrun. They required a pathway opened up through the enemy lines that would allow them to maneuver out of the area. The Berry was assigned the mission and was successful in opening up a pathway for the beleaguered marines.

The question of where our ship had been during its tour of duty in Vietnam and whether it had been inland in the waterways and canals of Vietnam commonly designated "Brown Water" was asked more and more, especially since some of our Berry crew was having health problems with symptoms similar to those caused by Agent Orange.

In any event Al's article should stand as what it is; a recollection of one man's participation in an event of our ship. Nothing should reflect negatively on Al.

The US Military had a chemical warfare program from 1964 to 1971 designated Project Agent Orange, in which herbicides and defoliant chemicals were used by being sprayed on the jungle areas. Exposure to a chemical in the defoliant, Dioxin, was later found to cause multiple health problems.

Shipmates started asking if on the night of the emergency gun fire mission Al Thomas had written about was it possible the Berry had gone up the Saigon River to a point where she could be eligible to be designated as a "Brown Water" ship. During her tour the Berry was a "Blue Water" or deep ocean ship. Brown Water ships were normally small craft that could maneuver the canals and waterways of Vietnam and provide support in their areas for US military forces.

The number of spoken requests and written emails we received at the Berry website led Dave Fickle and I to take a look into what was available within US government records. We hoped to prove or disprove if we were in "Brown Water." That first study we did resulted in our saying that we could not find any proof that the Berry was within inland waters. Conversely, we there was no proof she was not inland.

And, there the matter rested until February, 2012, when shipmate Rick Wooley, ETR3, 1965-66, sent us an email. He had found that the gun fire missions we had listed for the Berry's Vietnam records were incomplete. He supplied us with additional records from the US Archives. Dave Fickle and I looked at these records and realized that in addition to the date of the firing missions, they also showed the impact point for the targets we were shooting at. This meant we could calculate out from the land targets into the ocean and derive an area where the Berry may have been while firing at each target.

Dave was plotting targets when Rick came up with one NGFS mission for March 21, 1966, that we determined was most likely the mission Al had written about. We looked at the target area very closely, even examining the target area in 3D imagery. From this we saw where the most logical position for the Berry to be positioned was 10+ miles East-North-East of the flow of the Saigon River and about 1-2 miles offshore.

From what I saw after we plotted the complete file of shooting records, there was no evidence that the Berry was operating anywhere other than off shore of Vietnam during her time there.

The fact that we did not come up evidence that would establish eligibility for the Berry to be included in the program for Agent Orange medical assistance does not mean that we should stop petitioning the US Veterans Administration for reconsideration of their position. The winds around the world blow primarily from west to east, and wind does not stop at the shore line. Agent Orange materials could have been carried far out to sea and deposited in the water and on ships serving in the South China Sea. This is the water that the USS Fred T Berry DD-858 sailed in during her tour of combat during the Vietnam War.

Ed Teagle

Rick Wooley's thoughts:

I believe that there is "NO" confirmable proof that we went into a river, delta, bay, etc., even on the night of 21 March 1966. My mapping also shows me that the better shots for the night of 21 March 1966 would have been delivered from the SW or SE (ocean positions west and east of the southern tip of the land mass). Even though there appears to be a large hill on the SE side of that V shaped landmass, all target positions except for YS460520, would have been more accessible from the SE because they were on the ocean side of that hill. Latitude and Longitude for 21 March 1966, as we now know, were only listed at 0800 that day in the National Archives Deck logs, and the night shoot was more than 65 miles from our location at 0800. (The National Archives Deck logs are reduced versions of the Quartermaster's Deck Logs).

It would be interesting to read the non-edited Quartermaster deck logs for 21 March. It may have given us insight into the conversations between the USMC unit that we responded to and our ship; also it may have given us clues to any other verifiable geographic coordinates during the midday or night.

The Agent Orange Act of 1991, as we all know, included Blue Water Navy personnel who operated within the territorial waters off Vietnam. However, after that act was passed and in operation for many years, the VA took the confusing position that there is not enough qualitative or quantitative research data to prove that offshore Blue Waters sailors were exposed to the harmful effects of Agent Orange and especially its dioxin TCDD, so at that point the VA excluded many Navy Vets that were already receiving illness related compensationthe Institute of Medicine (IOM) concurred with the VA's reasoning, but only to a certain point. The IOM stated, if I remember correctly in their 2010 update, that there also was not enough qualitative or quantitative research data to exclude Blue Water Sailors.

What we attempted to do, as a team, was to do as much research as we all could, in order to see if the USS Fred T. Berry had indeed ever entered a delta, bay, river, etc., on our missions off the coast of Vietnam, even if only to turn around.

At the same time, we accumulated more data for Dave to include in our ship's history, such as firing missions and UTM target positions in grids XR, YR, YS and/or ZS.

I would gladly take on this group challenge again.....because there are many that were on the FTB during that tour, that may have been helped health wise, if we had succeeded.....Before I say goodbye, let me add this: There are officers from our ship that were more privy to detailed information about where we were and what was going on, than we had as enlisted personnel. Their input on this issue may or may not shed additional insight regarding our journey into the waters of Vietnam.

Rick Wooley

Dave Fickle's thoughts and findings:

New data was found about the Fire Missions of the FTB during the Vietnam War. As a result of this new info, Ed Teagle, Rick Wooley, Dick Leonhardt and I have done extensive research into the question as to whether the USS Fred T Berry ever went into an "Inland Waterway" during its deployment to Vietnam.

From the Gunfire Support information in conjunction with the "Deck Logs" on the same dates it does not seem that the Berry had any reason to have had a firing location anywhere other than the Ocean.

The ship may have gone up a river at a time that was not associated with a fire mission, however there seems to be no information indicating that it did. The ship could have been very close to the edges of the coastline and would most likely have been there at times of high tide. The ocean near the Mekong and Saigon river deltas appears to be much silted when viewed via "Google Earth" and is probably brackish as the rivers have high flows at times.

On the "night shoot" of March 21st 1966 the ship was most likely southwest of the target somewhere between 3 to 6 miles in range from the target; the target area was most likely visible from the ship, the ocean area to the southeast has an obstructed view do to topography. There are no rivers close to the firing coordinates that could have been navigated in the time available, as stated in the deck logs. There is however a river delta just west of the ships position which appears to be silted which would account for the appearance of brown colored ocean water. If the ship had indeed gone up that river it would not have been in any better firing position than was available from the ocean and the target would not have been viewable. That river has a width of about 750 feet at its narrowest and deeper water was probably only about 50 feet wide. Not a very safe place for a ship as the river is very populated along the sides and the water depth is unknown. Google Earth shows what appear to be barges on the river but they are about a third as long as a destroyer and have half the draft of a destroyer. The rivers mouth is a delta area that would be very dangerous to try to navigate at night.

To find the target locations shown on the PDF of the fire missions use "Google Earth". Simply type in the UTM alpha/numerals in the search argument proceeded with "48P. For example the first target listed could be located by searching 48PYS445500. Refer to the link that Rick Wooley found from the National Archives and put into a spread sheet by myself.

Just because the ship may not have gone "up river" does not preclude the possibility of the ships crew having been exposed to defoliants used all over the land areas adjacent to the ships Gun Fire Support operations. The ship was often within two miles of the coastline and aerial spraying often drifts due to wind. There is also research that indicates that the spraying could react with the water and in effect poison the ships drinking water.

David Fickle