

U.S. Navy's River Fleet Ends Operations in South Vietnam

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 30 — The United States Navy ended its four-year role in inland waterway combat today.

In a brief ceremony on an American river patrol boat, the United States flag was lowered and the yellow and red colors of South Vietnam were raised.

The ceremony marked the turning over to the South Vietnamese navy of 125 American-operated inland and coastal waterway combat craft, bringing the total to 650. It completed a two-year program of withdrawing Americans from combat roles in the "brown-water navy" that operated in the muddy waters of South Vietnam's many rivers and canals.

The brown-water navy is separate from the United States Seventh Fleet's operations on the high seas off the coast of North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

At today's ceremony Rear Adm. Jerome H. King, commander of United States Naval Forces in Vietnam, signed the official transfer documents along with Rear Adm. Tran Van Chon, commander of the South Vietnamese Navy.

About 17,000 American seamen and officers, however, will remain with the South Viet-

namese navy in shore positions and as advisers aboard the South Vietnamese craft.

The Americans are considered essential for the upkeep of the boats in the absence of qualified South Vietnamese mechanics and logistical staff.

Although the South Vietnamese Navy has more than doubled its manpower to a current level of 40,000 in two years, it is experiencing growing pains that, according to American naval officers, will require continued American help.

The South Vietnamese Navy's principal inland water operations are providing fire support to troops operating on the banks of rivers and canals, moving troops in assault craft and intercepting enemy sampan convoys.

The South Vietnamese navy also uses shallow-draft craft to patrol the country's 1,500 mile coastline to prevent the enemy from landing men and supplies from North Vietnam.

The American brown-water navy combat effort began in September, 1966. The officers of the small fleet pointed out that their craft were the first to be commissioned by the United States specifically for combat on inland waterways since gunboats cruised the Mississippi River during the Civil War.