

# MOBILITY, SUPPORT ENDURANCE

A story of Naval Operational  
Logistics in the Vietnam War  
1965-1968

by

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Vice Admiral Edwin B Hooper, USN (Retired) commanded the Service Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet from 20 July 1965 to 17 February 1968

*Excerpted from Pages 47 to 52 Mobility, Support Endurance:* The complete book can be found at: <http://www.archive.org/details/mobilitysupporteOOhoop>

## “UNDERWAY REPLENISHMENT

Much of that which would have been transferred at anchor in a protected location in World War II was accomplished at sea in this conflict. In Fiscal Year 1967, a typical year, over 70 percent of the ship fuel, 95 percent of the jet fuel, virtually all of the aviation gasoline, over 95 percent of the ammunition, 97 percent of the provisions, and over 70 percent of the stores were transferred at sea. Based on statistics of World War II from the book *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil* for the peak of the Okinawan campaign, one arrives at the following monthly underway replenishment comparisons with Fiscal Year 1967 when far fewer ships were involved:

ammunition—World War II, 7,000 short tons; VN, 15,000;

aviation fuel—World War II, 221,000 barrels; VN, 450,000;

provisions—World War II, 2,800; VN, 2,699;

mail—World War II, 1,005,000 pounds; VN, 3,400,000.

In the case of stores, the line items available for supply at sea were 100 in World War II; in 1967 they were 21,215.

The underway replenishment ships that contacted all the naval units in the South China Sea on a regular basis, provided lift for a multitude of other items. Transportation and delivery of mail, fleet freight, and

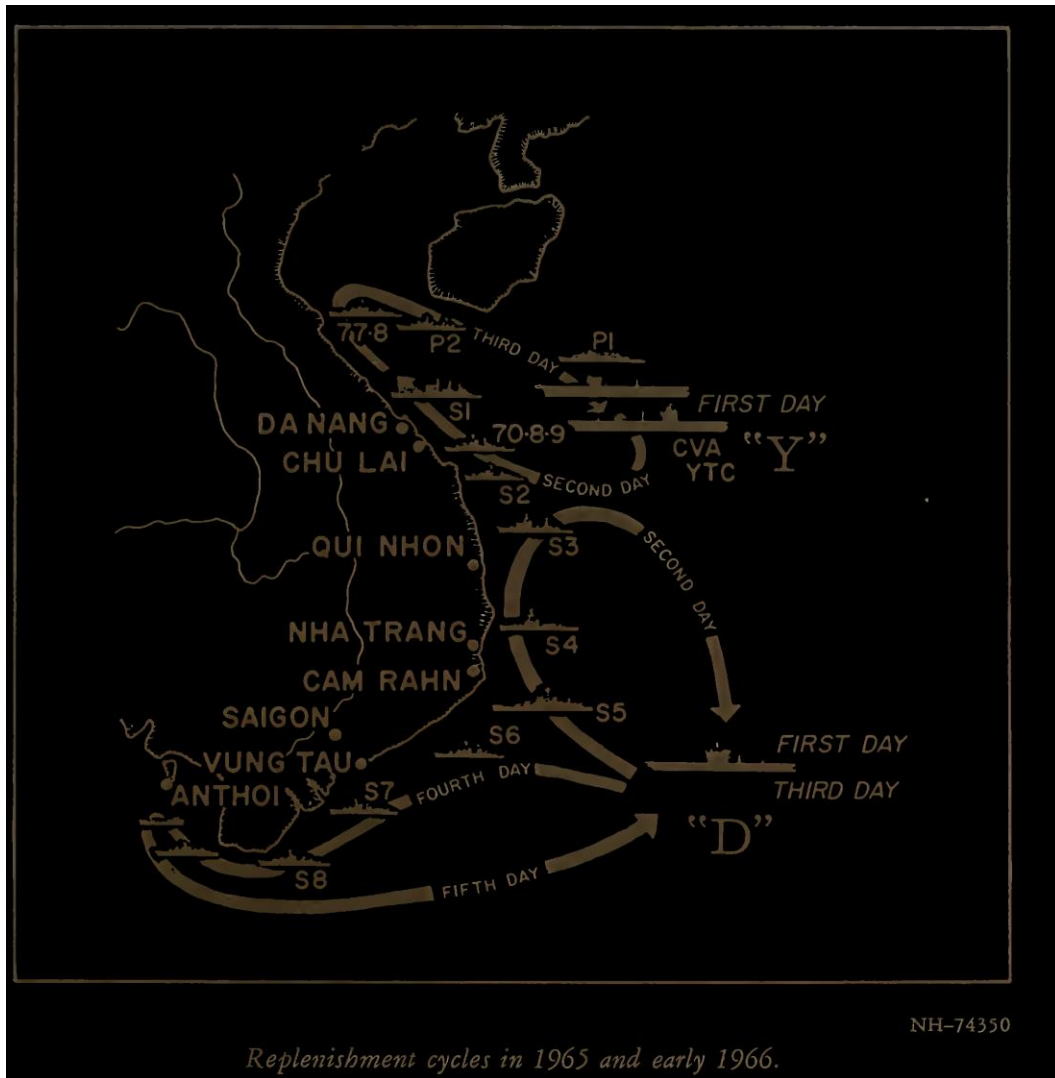
personnel were carried out on a daily basis. Surface mail was carried from Subic to ships on Yankee and Dixie stations, ships operating in the Tonkin Gulf, gunfire support ships, the amphibious groups, and Market Time units. Some of the airmail brought out to the carriers from Cubi Point and Danang by COD aircraft was delivered to nearby units by helicopters. Most of the remainder was delivered by underway replenishment ships.

Over 95 percent of the personnel received at Subic for transfer to fleet units were transported by ships by the Service Force, and personnel were returned in the same manner. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of fresh water were provided to ships at sea, to ships ranging in size from carriers to ocean minesweepers.

Special consideration had to be given to scheduling, coordinating, and controlling these operations. This was the mission of Commander Mobile Logistics Support Group (CTG 73.5). The Commanders of Service Squadrons Five and Seven were deployed alternately from Pearl Harbor and San Francisco, accompanied by some members of their staffs, and in rotation with the Assistant Chief of Staff for Readiness of COMSERVGRUTHREE. Initial deployment periods of two months were extended to three.

From time to time consideration was given to making this a permanent command. Although there would have been accompanying advantages, I always ended up favoring the existing situation. Rotation meant that squadron commanders brought back experience and know-how which gave them valuable perspective in training and otherwise preparing their ships for deployment. It gave these commanders operational command experience. The major disadvantages were lack of continuity and absences from their squadrons.

My relief, Rear Admiral "Walter V. Combs, later requested the change. As a result, Commander Service Squadron Nine was established in January 1969 and assigned on a one year unaccompanied tour. Major replenishments were normally planned two weeks in advance and a schedule was promulgated every three days, showing areas in which the underway replenishment ships would be operating in the South China Sea.



Each such ship transiting along the coast promulgated its own position and intended movements to naval ships in the area and then guarded the appropriate operational circuits for the area through which it was transiting. Fifteen minutes notice of a ship appearing and speeding alongside for replenishment was a normal way of life. To impart a feeling for the nature of these operations and the control of them, a review will be made of the critical fuel and ammunition replenishment operations, with brief mention of provisions and the impact of new ships.

#### FUEL

A typical cycle of fleet oilers (AO) in Fiscal Year 1966 went something like this. An oiler from Subic would rendezvous at Yankee Station where she would replenish the carrier task groups on the first day. The second and third day she would swing clockwise through the northern Market Time stations and into the Tonkin Gulf, return to Yankee Station to replenish once more the units there, and perhaps consolidate with an incoming oiler before returning to Subic. Another oiler would go from Subic to Dixie Station. She would replenish the carrier task group there on the first day, steam along the Market Time areas off the middle section of the Republic on the second day, return to replenish Dixie Station on the third, swing south along the coast to An Thoi on the fourth day, and return to Dixie Station on the fifth day.

In the summer of 1966, the pattern of underway replenishment was changed when all the carrier striking power was shifted north to concentrate on North Vietnam. By then airfields ashore had developed to the point where the Air Force and Marines could handle the vast majority of the support missions within the Republic itself. USS Intrepid, the last of the southern carriers, departed for Yankee Station on 5 August 1966 and Dixie Station was disestablished three days later. With three, and some times four or five, of the attack carriers of the Task Force 77 operating from Yankee Station, where they were joined for long periods of time by an ASW Group providing surface and sub—surface surveillance, the basic replenishment cycles were modified accordingly. The typical cycle became 3,300 miles in length (more than the distance across the Atlantic) and typically took twenty-one days. Starting in Subic, the first stop was Yankee Station. While in this area, replenishment ships would go approximately 200 miles to the north in Tonkin Gulf to replenish ships at the northern and southern Sea-Air Rescue stations, in the Positive Identification Radar Zone ("PIRAZ") ships whose tasks had to do with conducting air surveillance and control, and ships on Sea Dragon operations.



After leaving Yankee Station the ship would proceed south along 1,000 miles of coastline replenishing naval gunfire support, amphibious, and Market Time ships, and then return 1,300 miles back to Subic for resupply. Cycles were varied to adjust to the operations being supported. The low jet fuel (JP-5) capacity and low pumping rates of the older oilers created problems. This meant long times alongside the

carriers. In June 1967, Commander Service Group Three implemented a revised oiler rotation plan to improve the utilization of the greater pumping capabilities of the AO-143 class and the AO-105 {Jumbo} class oilers. These larger oilers remained in the vicinity of Yankee Station for their entire replenishment cycle. Under the new plan the smaller AO-22 class oilers left Subic and transited to the southernmost Market Time area, and from there proceeded north replenishing ships along the coast and up in the Tonkin Gulf. Then they went to Yankee Station to transfer remaining fuel to the larger oilers, and returned to Subic for resupply. An additional benefit was that replenishment of the smaller ships was less affected by late or unscheduled changes in CVA underway fuelings. The result was improved regularity of mail, passengers and fleet freight deliveries to ships along the coast of the Republic.

Another change instituted later in the year was to load 5 -inch ammunition on the deck of oilers going south to reduce the demands on the critical ammunition ships (AE), as had been done on occasion during World War II. In December 1967, the oilers started delivering fresh produce to the naval gunfire support ships.

In an eight month deployment, USS Ponchatoula (AO—148) conducted 484 underway replenishments to 503 ships, transferring 50,000,000 gallons of fuel and 69 tons of freight. One day in November she conducted twenty underway replenishments and one consolidation with another oiler, transferring 2,680,000 gallons of fuel oil and 653,000 gallons of jet fuel during a 24-hour period.”