





# Our Navy Men in Panama

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*Two-thirds of our foreign trade and petroleum pass through the Panama Canal and the Caribbean. In a European crisis, at least half of our supplies for NATO would go through these areas by sea. . .there can be no question that the national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. . . We have a vital interest, a moral duty, and a solemn responsibility. . . Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?*

—President Ronald Reagan  
April 27, 1983

"Hey, we need some more M-16 ammo over here!"

The voice is muffled in the pre-dawn darkness—the scene is Panama. The voice is almost lost in the noise created by hurrying figures who carry equipment to waiting patrol boats at pier side: water, rations, rifles, ammunition, spare parts. Two sailors heft a .50 caliber machine gun and carry it toward the boats; the narrow ladder leading down to them sags beneath the weight.

These rushing figures are backlit by a single floodlight shining over the door of Combat Harbor Patrol Division at the Naval Station Rodman. Dressed in khaki and sweating on this warm and humid dark night in the heart of Central America, these men are considered to be Panama Canal's first line of defense. They are one of a few units in the U.S. Navy that remain on combat alert 24 hours a day. Together with Panama's Guardia Nacional—the Republic of Panama's army—this riverine warfare unit is tasked with repelling all invaders who seek to destroy or take over the Panama Canal and its shore-based assets.

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Three boats have been loaded and are ready: one 50-foot PCF (patrol craft, fast), and two PBRs (patrol boat, riverine). The three will transit the Panama Canal; in this exercise they will share the locks with a merchant ship from Sweden, and later another from Japan. After about eight hours, they will come out on the Caribbean side of Panama and make their way east to the Chagres River.

There, the unit will team up with Army troops of the U.S. Southern Command—headquartered in Quarry Heights (also on the Pacific end of the canal)—and participate in four days of riverine/jungle warfare exercises.

Final equipment checks are made, and



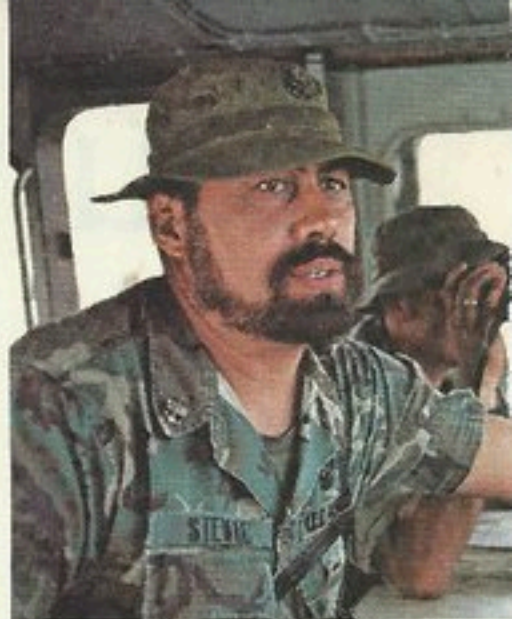
then Senior Chief Gunner's Mate Raymond Stewart gives the word: "All right! Let's get a move on if we're gonna keep our oh-five-thirty rendezvous with that Swedish cargo ship!" His voice, too, is nearly lost in the combined engine noise of three boats.

Stewart, who is the senior chief petty officer of the command at Rodman, is one of the few members of the patrol division who has had combat experience in Vietnam. He takes the wheel in the pilothouse and accelerates the engines of his PCF. The two PBRs follow suit, and within 30 seconds the black-hulled boats are lost in the darkness.

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Lieutenant Chip Bunce, officer in charge of the Combat Harbor Patrol Division, waits in his office later that morning. He has just heard that Stewart's flotilla met up with their Swedish "escort" without

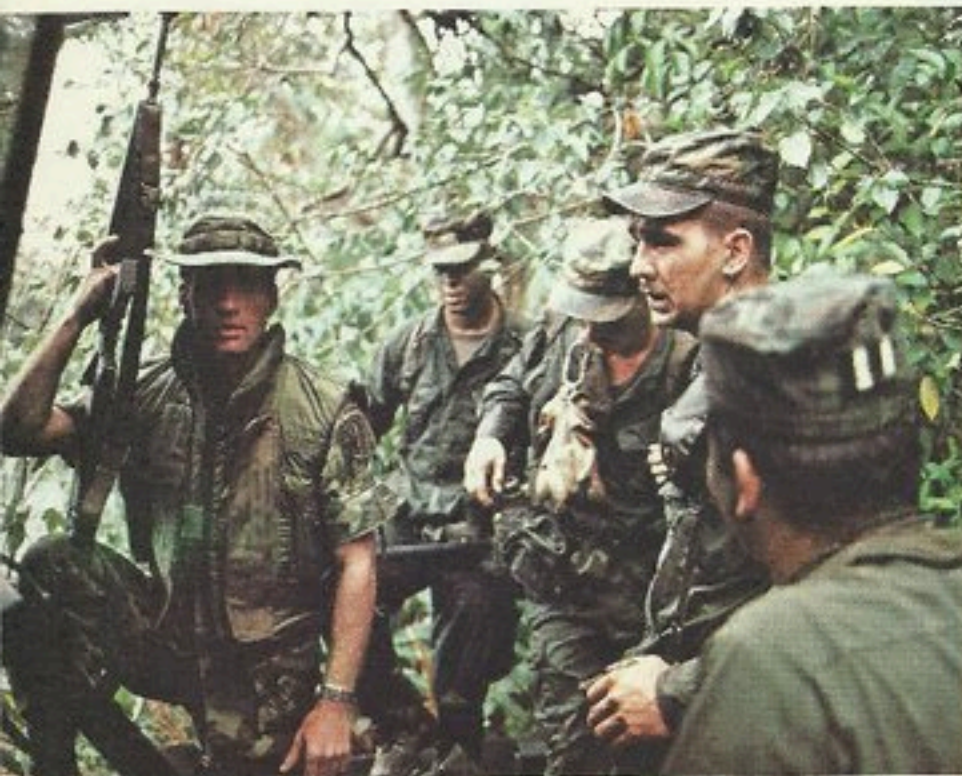
*An ideal setting for riverine/jungle warfare training is Panama's Chagres River, with its jungle-bordered banks. It is on the Chagres that naval units of Panama's Guardia Nacional and the U.S. Navy's Combat Harbor Patrol Division, Naval Station Rodman, hone their skills and conduct exercises with other riverine units.*



incident. They had already passed through the Miraflores Locks, the first of three sets of locks that make up the Panama Canal.

"Our main job here is to provide a waterborne defense of the Panama Canal, but we're really tasked for any type of conventional or unconventional warfare," Bunce said. "We train with many special units—the SEALs and UDTs of the Navy, Rangers and Special Forces of the Army, the Air Force's Combat Patrol Team, the Marine Corps and, of course, Panama's own Guardia Nacional."

In an adjacent room, Bunce's executive





officer, Lieutenant Carl Hurst, pores over training schedules. He wears a camouflage uniform while Bunce is in khakis. As the division's training officer, he must ensure that each member of the 35-man outfit meets the qualifications for the 9533 naval enlisted classification: riverine warfare specialist.

"There are several special boat units in the states that go through the same essential training as we do down here," Hurst explained. "But because of our geographic and strategic location, our level of training and preparedness is critical.

After all, we're the only ones right here at the canal."

A typical training lesson might be a 90-minute discussion on a certain strategy or tactical plan in connection with the operation of the patrol craft, or perhaps something more specific. Lecture topics include such things as reconnoitering, foreign weapons, ammunition color codes, operation of VRC-46 and -35B radios, damage control and engine troubleshooting, or how to handle prisoners of war.



"Personnel come here from all areas of the Navy," Bunce explained, "directly from boot camp, or ships or major shore bases. Whether they've got any experience or not, we take care of it with our extensive training program. We emphasize continual training—we don't let up. For any given week, we'll have at least three major training evolutions scheduled."

The training is necessary for the levels of responsibility encountered at a combat-ready command located in the heart of Central America.

Hurst said that when petty officers report to the patrol division, "We expect them to act like petty officers. That means being responsible in a leadership position. If someone doesn't know his role as a petty officer, then we teach him real fast. We just can't afford to have people around who don't know how to use their authority.

"For example," Hurst continued, "one of our second class petty officers is a boat captain for a PBR. That means he's responsible for a crew of four, plus a boat that's carrying a dual-mount .50-caliber machine gun and a 60mm mortar.

Chief Warrant Officer Jim Whittingham is the maintenance officer for the division. This morning, he works across from Bunce on prices for spare parts that he needs through local purchase. "We've got our own people trained to maintain these boats," he said, "and we have an ongoing program of preventive maintenance to keep them out of the shop in the first place.

"The material needed to deal with most minor problems is right here at the naval station. In addition, we get a crane and yank these boats out of the water every six months to give them a good going over. But if we need to have some extensive hull work—either the aluminum hulls of the PCFs or the fiberglass ones on the PBRs—then we have to contract the work out to some local firm. We just don't have the facilities here to do the work properly."

Each year since the latest Panama Canal Treaty went into effect in 1979, the U.S. naval forces there have carried out a joint

*Cross training is important to riverine warfare units, and every riverine warfare specialist must meet rigid qualifications before obtaining the 9533 NEC.*

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exercise with Panamanian naval units of the Guardia Nacional. Also included are Naval Reserve special boat units from different parts of the United States. Various elements from the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps forces based in Panama also participate.

According to Stewart, this year's exercise, *Kindle Liberty*, went very well. It showed that the forces dedicated to defend the canal can cooperate well together, integrating their individual units into one overall military operation. "We terminated *Kindle Liberty* this year with a live-fire exercise; it was a very effective demonstration which showed the amount of firepower we have at our disposal."

Besides *Kindle Liberty*, the focus on training for the "river rats" continues to be in the Chagres River on the Caribbean side; there joint exercises are carried out on a regular basis with many of the nearly 6,000 U.S. Army troops stationed in Panama.

"The Chagres River is an ideal setting for jungle warfare training," said Bunce.

"Both sides of the river are bordered by dense jungle with all sorts of snakes, bats, alligators, monkeys. There are even sharks in the waters. We have to prepare ourselves to survive under these conditions. We may find ourselves fighting in just such an area someday."

The locks at Gatun on the Caribbean end of the canal are left in the wakes of three black-painted boats as they open up their throttles and head toward a red, late-afternoon sun hanging low over the Caribbean. But the sun sets quickly in this part of the world. The chop gets a bit higher as the boats reach open sea in their swing eastward toward the Chagres.

One of the window panes in the pilot-house of the PCF has been taken out for replacement. Every now and then, the spray will come up over the bow, sail through the window and douse Lance Corporal George Daniels sitting in his port-side chair. Daniels is a Marine Corps reservist who lives in Panama, who also drills with the patrol boat squadron. Boat captain Stewart, at the helm, can't hold back

a grin when he sees his crewman's drenched face. "I would lend you my umbrella, but I forgot to pack it."

Stewart maneuvers the craft toward the river's entrance and lets one of the PBRs overtake his boat and then pull ahead. Then all three boats slow. The reason is a large "s"-shaped reef that guards the entrance to the Chagres. The PBR, with its 2-foot draft, will act as a scout for the deeper-draft PCF (about 7 feet). Stewart watches his Fathometer; its constantly shifting numbers bear witness that the depth beneath the hull is by no means constant.

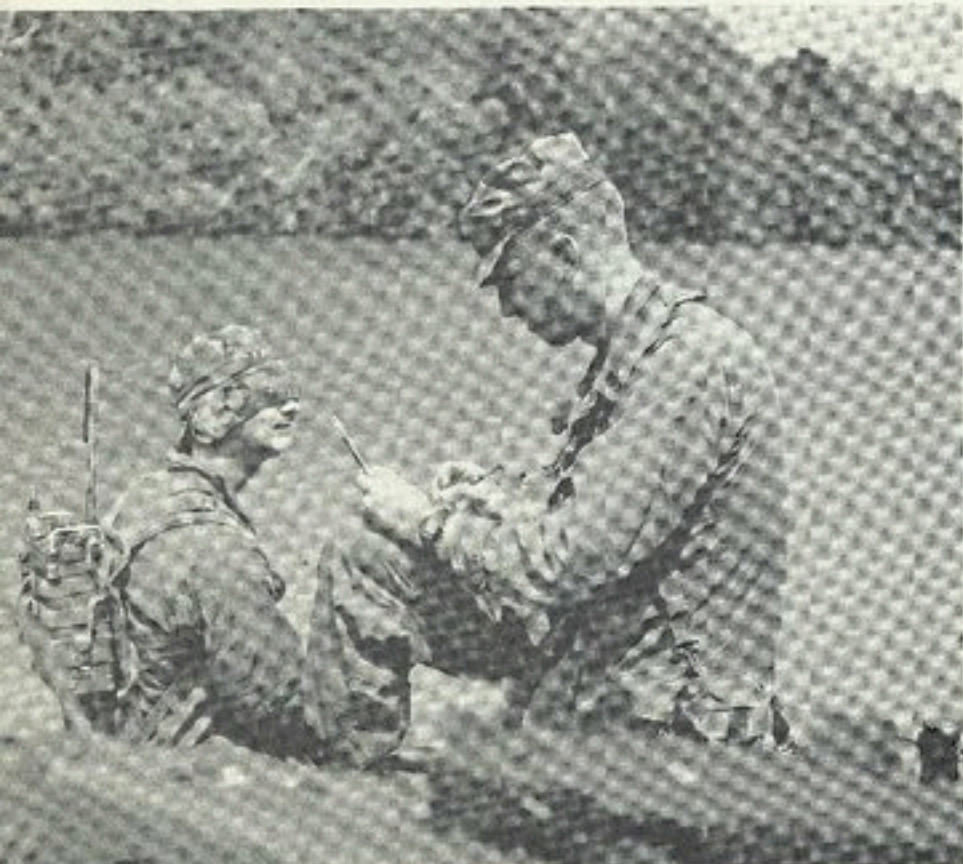
"Anybody can jump on these boats and ride them for four or five days and just sit behind the wheel here, or sit behind a weapon." Stewart talks while his eyes dart back and forth between the water in front of his bow and the readout of numbers on the Fathometer. "But that's not the whole concept by any stretch of the imagination. You have to be able to jump into anyone else's shoes on the boat without warning."

"Each person in this crew is cross-trained to perform jobs of engine man, gunner's mate, quartermaster, navigator or boat officer. If you don't know how to 'fight' the boat and don't know about things like the weapon systems, maneuvering and evasive tactics, then you may as well just go home. Anybody can drive a boat."

He glances at the Fathometer; it shows that only 6 feet are beneath the keel. "But not just anybody can run a boat like this around on a reef." He chuckles and spins the wheel. In response, the depth increases to 10 feet.

Once the mouth of the Chagres has been negotiated, Stewart opens up his PCF, and the smooth waters are roiled by the churning propellers of the patrol craft that now has its bow out of the water. It's hard to believe that the craft is moving at only 25 knots. The crew on deck watches the green serenity on either side fly by as the wash created by the boats boils onto the river's banks.

As the flotilla slows, the moon appears above the forest of trees on the port side. The river turns from green to black. Stew-



A U.S. Army sergeant interrogates an "enemy" infiltrator.

art brings his boat alongside a makeshift pier, where 14 camouflaged American soldiers look appropriately grim. Next to them, a native fisherman sharpens a fishing knife on a whetstone while tending his line.

Stewart and his men disembark and join the soldiers on the pier. They are mumbling many things, among them—"Did you see how fast that thing was going? Why do you think their boats are painted black? Look at all the guns that big one is carrying!" (Not only does the PCF have a dual-mount .50 caliber gun on the bow, but also another .50-caliber machine gun on the stern, an 81mm mortar, and usually an M-60 machine gunner is perched above the pilothouse.)

One of the soldiers, a ranger, makes his way forward. "Chief, I'm Staff Sergeant Mitchell Ganz. I'll be accompanying you on your boat as an evaluator/observer for the Jungle Warfare Branch and the Jungle

*Above right: Training doesn't allow much time for relaxation, but there are times when the men can take a few minutes' ease on the patrol boat. Below: For canal exercise Kindle Liberty, four 31-foot patrol boats from Special Boat Unit 22, New Orleans, La., are loaded onto an Air Force C-5A Galaxy for airlift to Panama. Photo by JO2 Lance Johnson.*



Operations Training School at (nearby) Ft. Gulick." Stewart shakes his hand. "Glad to have you aboard, sergeant. Is everybody ready for the briefing?"

The soldiers and sailors become one group. The fisherman casts his line anew and hopes for a few more fish before the boats start racing up and down the river.

Coordinates are given, call signs handed out, watches synchronized, and rendezvous times are agreed upon. Then the wait begins. Everyone will jump off into the jungle at 10 p.m.

One of the PCF's gunners, Electronics Technician First Class Frank Jacdeo, checks his dual .50 caliber/81mm mortar gun mount. The harsh metallic clicks seem out of place against the backdrop of wildlife noises and the fisherman's humming reel. "On exercises like this," Jacdeo said, "the only live rounds we carry are for the .45-caliber pistol on board. The rest are blanks. But when we escort a high-value ship through the canal—like a merchant ship with a load of uranium, or a submarine like the USS *Michigan* (SSBN 727)—we're armed to the teeth."

Finally, the hour arrives just as the fisherman is packing up his gear. The soldiers climb on board the PCF, and it races off with them into the night. The two PBRs,

assigned reconnaissance, go their separate ways. At a certain point upriver, Stewart abruptly slows his boat and turns it toward the land. He is about ready to run the bow onto the bank to land the troops when he spots something in the foliage dead ahead. He shouts, "Open fire!"

The Army men oblige and open up with their M-16 rifles. They rush off the boat in pursuit of the "aggressors" (some 100 are waiting for them in the jungle, Army troops in fatigue shirts and blue jeans playing the role of the enemy). All return minutes later; four prisoners are with them, blindfolded and bound. As they are brought aboard, the PCF's crew uncovers a rubber boat full of supplies hidden along the bank and makes it fast to the starboard side of the boat: spoils of combat.

On the return to base, Sergeant Ganz commands one of the prisoners to: "Put that cigarette out! What do you think this is, a pleasure cruise?"

Stewart maneuvers his craft close to an Army landing craft. "PCFs are ideally suited for this type of combat. The river presents a straighter course than did the waters in Vietnam, so you can't move around as much.

"Some people may say these boats are 18 years old and they aren't good any-



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more. But it wouldn't matter if they were 100 years old as long as they are in good shape. They are entirely self-sufficient for 30 days. We carry our own fresh water, power supply, food, ammunition and up to 800 gallons of fuel." Stewart is confident that the Navy's forces in Panama are sufficient to handle threats to the canal.

The four prisoners are turned over to the shore forces. One is relieved of papers containing radio frequencies and some information on a planned "enemy" ambush. The papers are studied by Ganz as the PCF races upriver; they're determined to foil an "ambush."

Meanwhile, one of the PBRs, under Quartermaster Third Class Steve Clement, has gone up a tiny tributary and cut its engines. The crew listens for sounds that might reveal an enemy presence.

All around, the boat is hemmed in by thick jungle that has turned multiple shades of gray beneath the bright moon. Clements whispers, "Most of us are assigned here; there are only about three or four volunteers."

"People make the usual complaints, but the riverine warfare is so different that they get interested in it real soon. It's just so different out here, nothing at all like what most people picture the Navy to be—you know, big gray ships slugging it out on the ocean.

"But we've got an important job," he added. "Don't think for a minute that we're about to forget about that."

Tonight, all is quiet as the crew tries to catch sounds of enemy activity. The enemy, however, appears to be equally quiet tonight. There will be no fire fight at this end of the river this night.

Meantime, Stewart has purposely run the bow of his patrol craft into the mud of a bank, just around a bend in the river. It is here that the "enemy" is supposed to pass; it is here where the "river rats" and their Army scout will wait to surprise those intent on surprise.

A low, mechanical hum is heard across the water—perhaps an approaching motorboat. But Engineman Second Class Wyatt Hart, moving his M-16 quietly from one hand to the other, shakes his head. "It's just the Gatun Locks opening up again."

Monkeys in the forest choose this moment to begin their all-night chattering. Mosquitoes find the boat's crew. On this long, black river, the dark seems to be much closer now—it would never venture as close in a city, or even on a country road.

The waiting continues with Ganz mon-

itoring radio frequencies. Jacdeo and Hart taking turns with the infrared imaging devices—peering into the darkness where suddenly everything is visible in sort of a fluorescent green—and Lance Corporal Daniels watching the radar scope for any movement on the river.

On the opposite shore, something

## Reservists

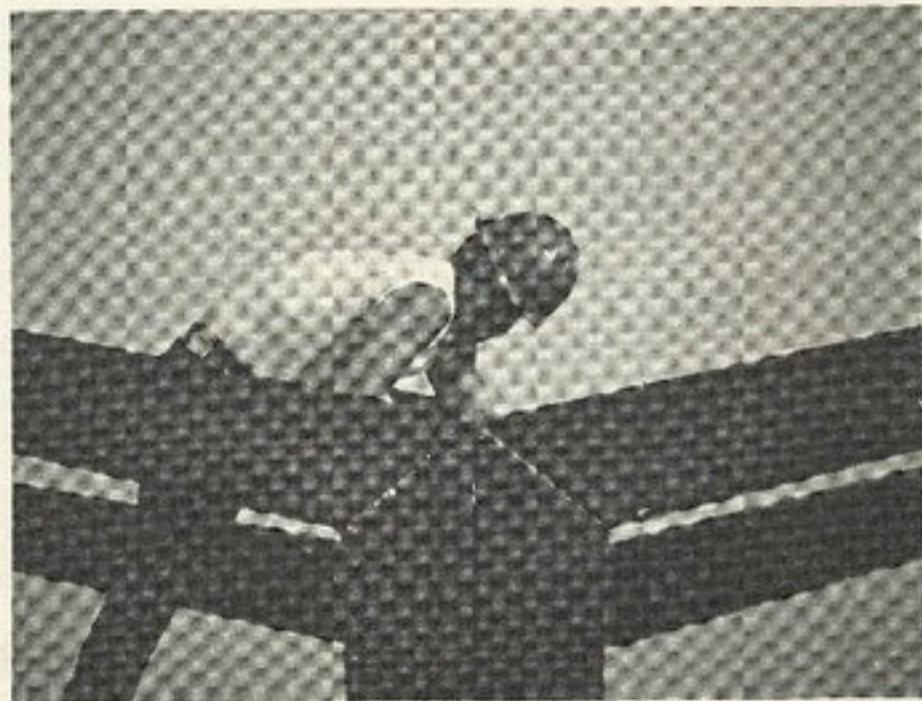
A 53-man detachment of reserve Seabees showed up in Panama recently to give U.S. Naval Station Rodman a helping hand. These reservists, members of Reserve Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 23 at Ft. Belvoir, Va., spent two weeks there to fulfill their annual active duty for training requirement.

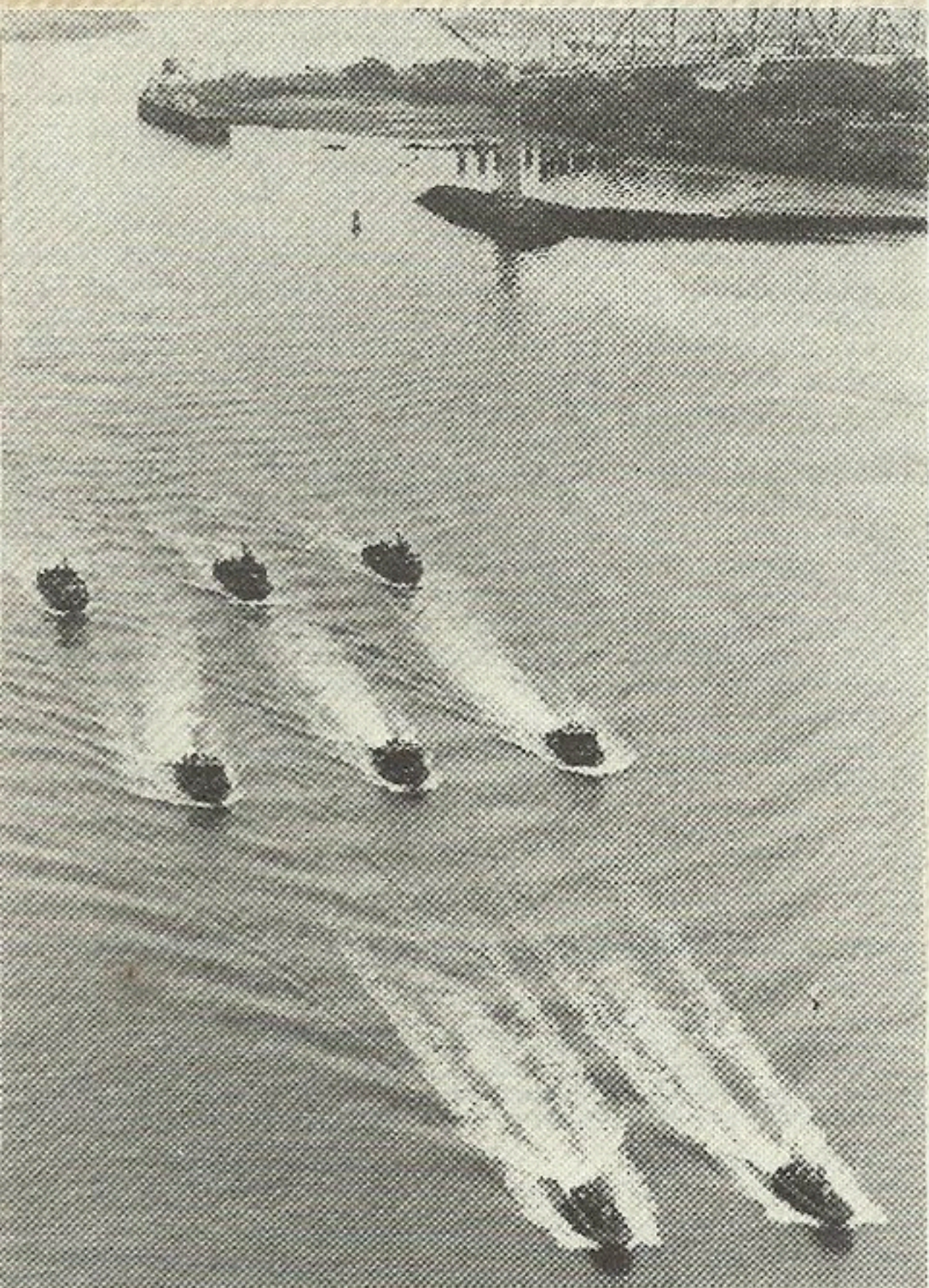
Once settled at the naval station, on the Pacific entrance to the canal, RNMCB 23's detachment tackled several construction projects it had been tasked to work on by the Eighth Reserve Naval Construction Regiment.

These included:

- Erection of a steel roof over a baseball field grandstand.
- Upgrading plumbing at unaccompanied personnel housing.
- Placing new streetlights (on concrete poles) throughout the station.
- Reconfiguring the entranceway to a floating dock.
- Building a recreation shelter.
- Setting poles for a new link fence at the Marine barracks.

Of these projects, the grandstand roof was one of the more challenging. "That





COMBAT CRAFT DIVISION, HARBOR OPS, USNAVSO/USNAVSTA