



FEATURES

22 INTERVIEW: A SENATOR LOOKS BACK

As told by Senator Daniel B. Brewster

A Marine combat veteran of World War II, Senator Daniel Brewster voted for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Subsequent events caused him to rue that decision.

30 NORTH VIETNAM'S MASTER PLAN

By Merle L. Pribbenow

Three years before the U.S. Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the North Vietnamese Politburo made the decision to conquer the South.

38 MEKONG DELTA AMBUSH

By Floyd Allen

Caught in a VC killing zone midstream on the Rach Ba Rai, the "Go Devils" of the 60th Infantry Regiment had a major fight on their hands.

46 NVA ATTACK ON QUAN LOI

By Swanson N. Hudson

The base at Quan Loi had long been a thorn in the enemy's side, and in August 1969 they decided to do something about it.

DEPARTMENTS

6 EDITORIAL

8 LETTERS/GLOSSARY

12 ARSENAL

By Blair Case

Tested in Vietnam, the self-propelled Vulcan air defense gun had its swan song during the Persian Gulf War.

14 FIGHTING FORCES

By Charles W. Sasser

For the first time since the Civil War, riverine craft played an important part in combat operations.

18 PERSONALITY

By Master Chief Gunners Mate W.R. Wells II, U.S. Coast Guard (ret.)

Two U.S. Coast Guardsmen risked their lives to rescue nine besieged South Vietnamese soldiers in 1969.

54 REVIEWS

By Kevin M. Hymel

A 1996 conference at Tulane University tried to sort out the U.S. Army's most notorious Vietnam War atrocity—the My Lai massacre.

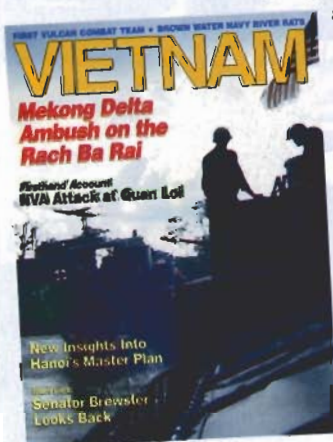
62 PERSPECTIVES

By Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., U.S. Army (ret.)

Precilla Wilkewitz, who served as an Army specialist 5th class, is the first woman ever elected VFW state quartermaster.

71 VIETNAM MARKETPLACE

Cover: A medevac chopper evacuates wounded members of the 60th Infantry Regiment from an



armored troop carrier on the Mekong Delta's Rach Ba Rai on September 15, 1967. The boats had pulled back to reassemble after VC soldiers caught them by surprise from both banks of the river (story, P. 38).
Cover image: Charlie Taylor

For the first time since the Civil War, riverine craft played an important part in combat operations.

By Charles W. Sasser



PBRs (patrol boats, river) depended upon speed and firepower for survival. By the end of 1967, U.S. Navy "River Rats" had begun to hamper the VC's use of Mekong Delta waterways.

In late 1966, the U.S. Navy began operating in shallow brown waters against an enemy for the first time since the Civil War, when Federal and Confederate sailors fought for control of the Mississippi River. President Abraham Lincoln's description of riverine forces a century earlier might well apply to the Brown Water Navy's efforts in South Vietnam's Mekong Delta: "At all the watery margins they have been present. Not all on the deep sea, the braced bay, and the rapid rivers, but also up the narrow muddy lagoon and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been and made their tracks."

The big battles and heavy airstrikes during the early days of the Vietnam War all occurred north of Saigon. South of Saigon, the Mekong Delta encompassed the entire southern tip of the country. The delta was a sleepy jungle swamp filled with rice paddies, insects, snakes and VC. Two wide rivers—the Bassac in the south and the Mekong farther north—flow through the region. The VC used the rivers and thousands of north-south canals to ferry men, arms, ammunition and supplies into the war zones north of Saigon.

South Vietnamese boatmen, advised by the U.S. Navy, made use of fixed river force bases and slow, low-riding junks in attempts to deny the enemy access to the delta's rivers and canals. But they were no match for the faster, more maneuverable trawlers and sampans used by the VC. Small lawn mower-type engines were modified with shafts 6 to 9 feet long to drive two-bladed propellers. Called "swimmer tails" or "shrimp tails," the outboards gave the VC an advantage in the Mekong. "The VC put two 10-horsepower swimmer tails on their long sampans and they'll do 30 knots," said U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Marsh Strum.

In July 1966, former underwater demolition team (UDT) member and Navy SEAL Lt. Cmdr. Roy Boehm reported to Captain Charles R. Johnson, commanding officer of the Naval In-Shore Operations Training Center at Mare Island, Vallejo, Calif. Boehm, who had recently served a Vietnam tour as adviser to the South Vietnamese UDT, known as Lien Doc Nguoi Nhai ("Soldiers Who Fight Under The Sea"), was a legend among U.S. Navy commando forces.

Boehm was a World War II veteran whose destroyer, USS *Duncan*, had been sunk from

under him at Guadalcanal, and who had worked his way up through the enlisted ranks. He was best known for having selected, trained and commanded the special volunteers of Navy SEAL Team Two, commissioned in January 1962. Boehm was literally the Navy's first SEAL—the unit's first commander. An acknowledged expert in unconventional warfare and tactics, he had seen action in the South Pacific, China, Korea and Cuba. In Southeast Asia, his Vietnamese frogmen had blazed a name for themselves through more than a dozen major enemy engagements.

"We will be training men to patrol the rivers and canals of Vietnam to prevent VC from transporting materiel and supplies," Captain Johnson informed the special ops officer. "We are going to start throwing rocks from glass boats!"

The craft, called PBRs (patrol boats, river), were dark-green fiberglass civilian cabin cruisers that measured 31 feet long and 10 feet 6 inches across the beam. Each boat was capable of traveling 25 knots per hour on twin 220-hp diesel truck engines. Control depended upon hydrojet propulsion rather than rudders or propellers. The boats were only lightly armored, since they depended upon speed and firepower for survival, and each would go into combat armed with twin .50-caliber machine guns forward and a single .50-caliber aft, supplemented by an assortment of small arms. The PBR was designed for a crew of four men: a boat captain, a coxswain, an engineer/after gunner and a forward gunner.

"This is going to be a big escalation, far beyond an advisory effort," Captain Johnson said. "A call for volunteers has already gone out to the fleet." Boehm replied: "That means every skipper in the fleet has a chance to purge himself of his troublemakers. Hell, that's great, even if they come from the brig. A rogue enterprising enough to get in trouble doesn't go by the book.... It's not the book but ability to think under pressure instead that means salvation."

Boehm teamed with Navy Lieutenant Joe Luallen to build and develop a training program for Vietnam's first riverine operations. Eventually, Operation Game Warden included two elements—a riverine patrol

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

section known as Task Force 116, and a riverine assault element named Task Force 117. Later, Task Force 115, code-named Operation Market Time, joined Game Warden in operating more than 100 fast patrol boats, 30 U.S. Coast Guard cutters and hundreds of South Vietnamese junks against enemy smuggling in the South China Sea. Farther offshore, U.S. Navy destroyers and minesweepers reinforced by five U.S. carriers and their aircraft would form an outer barrier.

A 16-week course of training was designed to prepare sailors for a brand of warfare unique to the Mekong Delta. It started with a four-week introductory course at the Counterinsurgency School in Coronado, Calif., followed by eight more weeks at the Naval In-Shore Operations Center. There, prospective "River Rats" learned boat operations, weapons and tactics. The last four weeks were spent in the Philippines learning escape and evasion, resistance to interrogation and guerrilla warfare.

Training was fast-paced and unforgiving, with heavy emphasis on realism. The sailors learned water survival, boat abandonment and water safety, boat salvage, WIA (wounded in action) recovery, downed pilot rescue and first aid. They also practiced raids and ambushes—live firing with .50-calibers from the racing PBRs day after day until burnt cordite seemed to hang per-

manently in the air. At the end was a stressful week of mock battles and patrolling called "Hell Week."

Graduates of the riverine school began feeding into the growing war machine in Southeast Asia. Lieutenants, ensigns, even chief petty officers and petty officers 1st class commanded patrols, while mid-rated petty officers became boat commanders. Although Army and Marine Corps ground actions overshadowed riverine operations, PBR sailors saw sustained and sometimes intense action in the coastal regions of Vietnam. The River Rat's job was mostly routine, like a traffic cop's, though he never knew when hatches might fly open on a stopped trawler to reveal VC with big black guns.

VC used almost anything that would float to smuggle war materiel. Trawlers and junks were painted black and traveled near shore without running lights. Canoelike sampans could carry two or three AK-47s at a time in a basketful of rice. If discovered, some boat operators chose to run for it or beach their craft to let the crews escape. Others fought back.

"The function of the PBR is to police the rivers, not fight it out with shore parties," Captain Johnson pointed out. "The men learn to calculate the risk and take it only when they have the odds. If ambushed, they fire back immediately, then get the hell out of the kill zone."

SEALs came to depend extensively upon riverine forces for transportation and support, as did regular U.S. Army ground forces. River Assault Squadron 7, a part of Task Force 117, was commissioned specifically to support combat troops in the Mekong. On June 19-20, 1967, while working with the 2nd Brigade of the Army's 9th Infantry Division, it won a major victory over a 400-man VC battalion, during which 162 enemy soldiers were slain. The Americans lost 28 dead.

By the end of 1967, Game Warden and Market Time sailors were successfully interfering with enemy use of the waterways. They were stopping and searching more than 3,000 suspicious craft daily. They had also seized or destroyed tons of war materiel during that year and killed or captured an impressive number of enemy soldiers. They made more regular contact with the enemy than any other U.S. outfit in the war while suffering fewer casualties per capita.

River Division 51 of Task Force 116 was typical of PBR units in Vietnam. The division included River Sections 511 and 512, each of which had 10 PBRs and about 65 officers and men. They depended upon base support units or the support of a specially configured WWII-era LST (landing ship, tank) to keep the boats repaired and to feed and house the men.

Continued on page 70




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FIGHTING FORCES

Continued from page 16

The patrol base for River Section 511 lay five or six miles up the Bassac River from Can Tho. A poorly maintained road ran past the small village of Binh Thuy and past a large Vietnamese military airfield. A mile or so farther on, the PBR base sat next to a tiny, five-hooch hamlet called Tra No. The River Rats lived in a deserted French motel. An old converted naval barge anchored 50 feet offshore housed the repair shops, and a floating pier to berth the PBRs was moored to its side.

River Section 512 fought out of the supporting LST anchored in the South China Sea, five miles from the mouth of the Bassac. Two ex-Army Bell UH-1B "Huey" helicopters and six Vietnamese Regional Forces soldiers were also stationed on the LST.

"We only came up the river in May of '66," explained River Division 51's CO, Lt. Cmdr. Marsh Strum. "We didn't know what to expect.... Our mission was to search the sampans and junks to ensure that there were no weapons crossing the Bassac and that everyone had the proper identification papers."

After seven months in-country, Strum explained to his relief commander: "You're second generation. You guys have the benefit of what we screwed up and what we did well.... You'll find that you don't have enough boats or helo gunships to do the job right. You won't have enough repair parts. New replacement personnel will come slowly, although I've heard there's a lot of sailors in the pipeline. We've got 55 miles of river from here to the South China Sea to patrol, and the VC essentially cross about anywhere they want to.

"My men are tired," he continued. "They're run-down. The boats are in horrible shape. Sometimes we even get short of ammo. The food is lousy. And it's always so damned hot, and the goddamned bugs drive us crazy."

In spite of all this, however, the U.S. Navy Riverine Forces fought successfully for more than two years to retake the streams and swamps of the Mekong from the VC. Beginning in 1968, the struggle gradually tapered off at sea and on the rivers as the war began to peak on land with massive buildups of enemy troops in South Vietnam—and with 536,000 American GIs shipped to Vietnam.

The U.S. Navy began turning over \$7.7 million worth of riverine assault craft to the South Vietnamese navy. By the end of 1969, some 242 Game Warden and Market Time patrol craft had been relinquished to South Vietnam. Virtually no U.S. Navy or Coast Guard vessels remained in Vietnamese brown waters after the first few weeks of 1970. The era of the American PBR glass boats had come to a close. ☆