

# [Introduction a river divides into several smaller rivers](https://assignbuster.com/introduction-a-river-divides-into-several-smaller-rivers/)

IntroductionTheVietnam War (1955-1975) was a largescale military effort by the United States (followingtheir involvement in the Korean War, 1950-1953) to try and kerb and prevent thespread of Communism from China into Southern Vietnam.  The US feared that this could rapidly lead tothe further fall of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand – the Domino Theory – whichcould propagate into a Soviet challenge of the US as a superpower.   “ If you let a bully come into your garden, the next day he’ll be inyour porch, and the day after that he’ll rape your wife. 1″PresidentJohnson TheMekong Delta (Figure1 The Mekong Riverand Figure 2 The Mekong Delta)is an area in Southern Vietnam to the South of Cambodia and South-West ofSaigon (later in 1976 Saigon was merged with the surrounding provinces andrenamed Ho Chi Minh City after the communist leader accredited with reunitingthe North and South).  A delta bydefinition is ‘ an area of low, flatland, sometimes shaped like a triangle, where a river divides intoseveral smaller rivers before flowing into the sea’2.  TheMekong River is significant because it was deemed to be ‘ by far the mostimportant region in South Vietnam3’due to it being one of the most productive areas in the world for rice growing.  The area is predominantly made up of flat, highly fertile agricultural land in the form of flood plains.  The amount of water in these areas depends onthe season – during the wet season (May-October) the waterways widen and ricepaddies are deliberately flooded.

Thisterrain created its own challenges that meant that very different tactics hadto be employed by the Americans in comparison to traditional war fighting inorder to be an effective fighting force – by its very nature the Mekong delta is divided by its rivers andtributaries making straight line travel and travel by road very difficult.  ‘ Throughout the country the road and rail system wasrudimentary – the side that controlled the rivers and canals controlled theheart of South Vietnam’4. Assuch the US Navy established what was known as the ‘ River Patrol Force’ on the18th December 1965.  Theobjectives of the Naval Mobile Riverine Force were to ‘ locate, encircle anddestroy Communist Units in battle’5.  ‘ There are very few areas that lie more thana few hundred meters from a navigable waterway’6– this statement was particularly prevalent during the wet season when therewere over 3000 nautical miles of waterways with poor road and railinfrastructure.

To overcome these challenges river patrolboats (PBRs) became the main stay of the task force. The PBRs were a militarisedpleasure boat that could travel at speeds of up to 29knots carrying machineguns, a grenade launcher, a surface radar and two radios.  Mark 1 PBRs were constantly hampered in theirperformance due to weeds and other detritus fouling up the water jetengines.  In addition, the Mark I’s hadfragile fibreglass hulls that were easily damaged.  To combat this the Mark II wasintroduced.  Mark II’s had improvedJacuzzi jet pumps that could filter away the weeds from the dirty waterwaysallowing for greater consistent speed and a reduction in repair and maintenancetime.  Secondly, more durable aluminiumgunwales were fitted that could withstand the greater speed and pressureassociated with coming alongside an enemy vessel.  In1966 the US Navy introduced the patrol air cushion vehicle (PACVs).

These werecapable of up to 55knots and could carry up to a crew of 20.  The PACVs were tested and performed well infar reach and remote delta areas. However, they were very noisy and did not appear to offer significantadvantages over the already available helicopters7from the Army. The USNavy had logistical and supply challenges to overcome through the lack ofoverland supply lines and number of available on land forward operatingbases.  To mitigate this the USstrategically placed support ships such as the Landing Ship Dock and LandingShip Tank at the mouths of the larger rivers.

These ships could act as floating platforms not only for the RiverPatrol Boats but also for a two-helicopter section of Navy HAL-3s.  The support ships could transfer stores suchas food, munitions, fuel and do fast reaction drops of the Army’s 101stAirborne Division.  Further marine craftacted as support for the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF).  Armoured troop carriers were converted toaccommodate aircraft with landing pads on the roof and other mobile floatingbases would hold ground troops as well as artillery units for strategic landattacks.  This was all under the commandof General William C.

Westmoreland, Commander U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV).  The strategicmission was for the MRFs to be ‘ no more than 35nm away from their patrol areason floating offshore bases, LPDs and inland bases’8. Militaryoperations were largely governed by the civilian population – the majority ofwhich lived south of Saigon due to the fertile river delta.

Many felt the impact ofmilitary operations.  U. S. commanderswere obliged to maneuverer their forces so as to interfere as little as possiblewith the normal now of civilian transport9.  For example, during the dry season it was possible for tanks and trackedvehicles to travel across the rice paddies however this negatively affected thewelfare and profitability of the region.  On a positive note, ‘ patrol tactics were initially viewed with concern by the local populousbut as time went by the security that followed up the patrol effort becameincreasingly appreciated’10. It wasthe sheer multitude of the network of tributaries and canals off the mainrivers which posed problematic for the US to control.

This was countered by increasing the resourcesavailable to the mobile riverine operations – increasing patrol frequency, number and area.  The boats provided theincreased mobility and heavily armoured floating bases to the Army Brigades andwhen used in conjunction with helicopter forces they could provide rapid andsurprise attacks in the enemy11.  They were often the most effective force asthey did not get pinned down.

‘ Daytimepatrol zones were some 50km long, river patrol vessels moved in a loose columnat varying speeds.  Specific routes aswell as time of patrols was randomly selected. Since traffic was generallydense it was impossible to check all vessels. However the high speed of the patrol vessels made a substantial samplingof the traffic possible.

At night all boats underway were in violation ofcurfew.  These boats were immediatelypursued and seized or destroyed’12. Conclusion” Riverine forces come in many shapes and sizes dependent on environmentand mission capability, defying a “ one size fits all” approach to forcestructure.

No war in the modern eraillustrates this fundamental nature of riverine warfare better than the VietnamWar” 13. Lieutenant Commander USN, William B. Bassett   Theenemy will eventually adapt, improvise and overcome – striking back with ariver ambush as the Viet Cong did in September 1967 along a two mile stretch ofthe Ba Rai River southwest of Saigon which resulted in half of the vessels inthe convoy being hit by enemy fire, three dead sailors and 77 wounded14.

1 Quoted in New York Times, “ Vietnam Ghosts: Opinion” November 2001, 112 (CambridgeDictionary, 2017)3 (Fulton, 1973)4 (Marolda, 1994)5 (Marolda, 1994) p. 1986 (Fulton, 1973)7 (Col. Victor Croizat USMC, 1984) p.

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11813 Bassett, William B., The Birth of Modern Riverine Warfare: US Riverine Operations in the VietnamWar, 2006, (Naval War College), p. 5. 14 (Marolda, 1994) p. 210