

Introduction a river
divides into several
smaller rivers



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The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was a large scale military effort by the United States (following their involvement in the Korean War, 1950-1953) to try and curb and prevent the spread of Communism from China into Southern Vietnam. The US feared that this could rapidly lead to the further fall of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand - the Domino Theory - which could 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 in your porch, and the day after that he'll rape your wife." President Johnson

The Mekong Delta (Figure 1 The Mekong River and Figure 2 The Mekong Delta) is an area in Southern Vietnam to the South of Cambodia and South-West of Saigon (later in 1976 Saigon was merged with the surrounding provinces and renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the communist leader accredited with reuniting the North and South). A delta by definition is 'an area of low, flatland, sometimes shaped like a triangle, where a river divides into several smaller rivers before flowing into the sea'². The Mekong River is significant because it was deemed to be 'by far the most important region in South Vietnam'³ 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 on the season - during the wet season (May-October) the waterways widen and rice paddies are deliberately flooded.

This terrain created its own challenges that meant that very different tactics had to be employed by the Americans in comparison to traditional war fighting in order to be an effective fighting force - by its very nature the Mekong delta is divided by its rivers and tributaries making straight line

travel and travel by road very difficult. ' Throughout the country the road and rail system was rudimentary - the side that controlled the rivers and canals controlled the heart of South Vietnam'⁴. As such the US Navy established what was known as the ' River Patrol Force' on the 18th December 1965. The objectives of the Naval Mobile Riverine Force were to ' locate, encircle and destroy Communist Units in battle'⁵. ' There are very few areas that lie more than a few hundred meters from a navigable waterway'⁶- this statement was particularly prevalent during the wet season when there were over 3000 nautical miles of waterways with poor road and rail infrastructure.

To overcome these challenges river patrol boats (PBRs) became the mainstay of the task force. The PBRs were a militarised pleasure boat that could travel at speeds of up to 29 knots carrying machine guns, a grenade launcher, a surface radar and two radios. Mark I PBRs were constantly hampered in their performance due to weeds and other detritus fouling up the water jet engines. In addition, the Mark I's had fragile fibreglass hulls that were easily damaged. To combat this the Mark II was introduced. Mark II's had improved Jacuzzi jet pumps that could filter away the weeds from the dirty waterways allowing for greater consistent speed and a reduction in repair and maintenance time. Secondly, more durable aluminium gunwales were fitted that could withstand the greater speed and pressure associated with coming alongside an enemy vessel. In 1966 the US Navy introduced the patrol air cushion vehicle (PACVs).

These were capable of up to 55 knots and could carry up to a crew of 20. The PACVs were tested and performed well in far reach and remote delta

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areas. However, they were very noisy and did not appear to offer significant advantages over the already available helicopters⁷ from the Army. The US Navy had logistical and supply challenges to overcome through the lack of overland supply lines and number of available on land forward operating bases. To mitigate this the US strategically placed support ships such as the Landing Ship Dock and Landing Ship Tank at the mouths of the larger rivers.

These ships could act as floating platforms not only for the River Patrol Boats but also for a two-helicopter section of Navy HAL-3s. The support ships could transfer stores such as food, munitions, fuel and do fast reaction drops of the Army's 101st Airborne Division. Further marine craft acted as support for the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF). Armoured troop carriers were converted to accommodate aircraft with landing pads on the roof and other mobile floating bases would hold ground troops as well as artillery units for strategic land attacks. This was all under the command of General William C.

Westmoreland, Commander U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV). The strategic mission was for the MRFs to be 'no more than 35nm away from their patrol area as floating offshore bases, LPDs and inland bases'⁸. Military operations were largely governed by the civilian population - the majority of which lived south of Saigon due to the fertile river delta.

Many felt the impact of military operations. U. S. commanders were obliged to maneuver their forces so as to interfere as little as possible with the normal flow of civilian transport⁹. For example, during the dry season it was

possible for tanks and tracked vehicles to travel across the rice paddies however this negatively affected the welfare and profitability of the region. On a positive note, ' patrol tactics were initially viewed with concern by the local populous but as time went by the security that followed up the patrol effort became increasingly appreciated'¹⁰. It was the sheer multitude of the network of tributaries and canals off the main rivers which posed problematic for the US to control.

This was countered by increasing the resources available to the mobile riverine operations - increasing patrol frequency, number and area. The boats provided the increased mobility and heavily armoured floating bases to the Army Brigades and when used in conjunction with helicopter forces they could provide rapid and surprise attacks in the enemy¹¹. They were often the most effective force as they did not get pinned down.

' Daytime patrol zones were some 50km long, river patrol vessels moved in a loose column at varying speeds. Specific routes as well as time of patrols was randomly selected. Since traffic was generally dense it was impossible to check all vessels. However the high speed of the patrol vessels made a substantial sampling of the traffic possible.

At night all boats underway were in violation of curfew. These boats were immediately pursued and seized or destroyed'¹². Conclusion" Riverine forces come in many shapes and sizes dependent on environment and mission capability, defying a " one size fits all" approach to force structure.

No war in the modern era illustrates this fundamental nature of riverine warfare better than the Vietnam War" ¹³. Lieutenant Commander USN, <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-a-river-divides-into-several-smaller-rivers/>

William B. Bassett The enemy will eventually adapt, improvise and overcome – striking back with a river ambush as the Viet Cong did in September 1967 along a two mile stretch of the Ba Rai River southwest of Saigon which resulted in half of the vessels in the convoy being hit by enemy fire, three dead sailors and 77 wounded¹⁴.

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

1228 (Col. Victor Croizat USMC, 1984) p. 1199 Major General William B. Fulton, ‘ Riverine Operations 1966-1969’, Vietnam Studies, Department of the Army Washington, D. C., 1985, p. 20 ¹⁰ (Col.

Victor Croizat USMC, 1984) p. 11811 (Frank Uhlig, 1986) p. 29212 (Col. Victor Croizat USMC, 1984) p.

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