

Saigon, Vietnam
August 25, 1967

Mr. S. A. Schreiner, Jr.
The Reader's Digest
Pleasantville, New York

Dear Sam:

Please excuse my tardiness in getting off to you this outline on riverine warfare; I've been up to my ears in Vietnamese politics and election coverage since my return.

For this outline, I prefer not to give an order in which the piece would be put together because, beginning in September, when the rains inundate the Mekong Delta, a series of large-scale, river-borne operations will be mounted. A number of different kinds of units will be involved--U. S.-Vietnamese Special Forces, the U. S. Mobile Riverine Force, the U. S. Navy coast guard cutters, the Vietnamese naval units carrying regular ARVN troops and paramilitary units. Probably--but not for sure--the Hovercraft "flying boats" will also be back in Vietnam by that time, and would be included in the operation. The significance of these operations is to sweep and search the swampy Plain of Reeds, which cuts across the Viet Cong-controlled portions of several provinces along the Cambodian border west of Saigon. Hopefully, these operations would provide at least an action, color lead for the article, if not a major part of the piece itself. But, of course, they could also be a giant fizzle and worth not more than two lines. I would hope, however, to spend quite a bit of time covering these actions for the article.

Aside from the lack of chronology for the outline, this is what I judge to be the significance of the article:

1. The inland water operations by U. S. units have been fairly successful. This is the assessment of the U. S. command here. The trouble is, however, the officials can not articulate or prove it in clear-cut terms. They have bundles of statistics of sampans searched, persons detained and so on; but it's difficult to weigh these, since obviously they don't know how many Viet Cong are getting through their river screens and blockades.

Hence, I suppose that the success of the whole river operation will have to be implied in the writing by the accumulation of a number of isolated incidents and actions, rather than Delta-wide generalizations. In short, much like Andy Jones handled his SEAL's article.

2. The U. S. Mobile Riverine Force represents a new kind of tactical mobility for the U. S. command here. Before, helicopters provided the chief means of moving troops into battle. Now, the riverine units usher in a new kind of aqua-borne mobility for U. S. forces. In mangroves and river swamplands, this has the advantage of moving the troops along the flooded water level. The Special Forces commander gave the example that to fly over the flooded terrain in a helicopter one could not see the enemy. But from the boats, one could see the Viet Cong houses in the tops of the trees from which they moved to and fro and stocked their weapons and ammunition. The U. S. commanders are still experimenting with new tactics for their wide variety of vessels. Up to now, they have used the heavily-armored gunboats on the water much like they would employ heavy tanks on land; smaller armed vessels are used like light tanks and the troop-carrying vessels like trucks.

3. The operations represent the first time since the U. S. Civil War--and the second time in its history--that the American military establishment has engaged in warfare on rivers and inland bodies of water on a sustained basis. This should be sort of a thread for the article, as well as a major point of emphasis, I believe. Fortunately, one of the U. S. Naval officers in the Delta is a Civil War buff; his grandfather was a Union commander, and somehow with quotes and analogies, I think this can be spun through the piece.

According to the U. S. Navy here, the birth of the U. S. river assault force was in May, 1861, when General George McClellan suggested to General-in-Chief Winfield Scott that Federal troops stationed in Cairo, Illinois, needed river gunboats. After the Civil War, the force was disbanded and the U. S. did not have an assault force specifically designed for a riverine environment until September 1, 1966, when the U. S. flotilla for Vietnam was commissioned.

4. While for the U. S. this new type of warfare means returning to our Civil War days, river operations in Vietnam are not new. The Vietnamese Navy has been doing them for years. As background, rather than as a major portion of the article, I suggest including a bit about the Vietnamese River Assault Groups (RAG's). Like the U. S. Mobile Riverine Force, the RAG's are a mini-armada of LCM's, which one U. S. officer explained this way: "You remember the pictures of Iwo Jima with the big boats steaming in the distance and the little boats carrying troops from the big boats to the beaches. Well, here we're fighting with only these little boats." Each RAG can carry a battalion of Vietnamese troops into battle and support it with gunfire; in effect, this is World War II amphibious warfare on a Tom Thumb scale.

We should include the Vietnamese because they do an important part of the river operation--and it's only fair to give them some credit--but also because they provide an interesting twist to the whole article. From them, the U. S. river-borne units were copied and Vietnamese Naval advisors were assigned to teach the U. S. Riverine Force while it was in training in California and on its trial operations in Vietnam.

Briefly, the story of the whole riverine concept is this: after World War II, the U. S. gave alot of LCM's to the French, who brought them to Vietnam to fight, mostly in the Red River Delta of North Vietnam. The French converted some of these LCM's into command ships and into gunboats to protect the other troop-carrying ones. They called these mini-battleships Monitors--no one here knows if they were named after the U. S. Civil War vessels or not. Then, when the French pulled out, they turned over their river fleet to the Vietnamese Navy. When American Naval advisors came in the early '60's, they carried the idea back to the U. S. and from these the U. S. riverine units were formed. The U. S. Naval advisors are very humble about admitting that the Vietnamese have taught them more than they taught them in this whole area of operation.

One of the complications of this article is that aside from the naval units, the ground forces they carry into battle can alter from Special Forces to U. S. Army to Vietnamese irregulars. So, to limit this, I'd suggest focusing on these two ground components on the American side:

1. The U. S. Mobile Riverine Force. This would be a major part of the article, since the two U. S. Army battalions are already integrated with the U. S. Naval River Assault Flotilla. These Army-Navy teams live together on air-conditioned floating barracks. Aqua-borne pads for helicopters have been built for emergencies. To get the quotes and color necessary to make this unit come alive, I'd plan to spend about a week with them, or maybe more if they fit into the lead about the Plain of Reeds operation. I do not, however, think this unit is spectacular enough to sustain the whole piece. They haven't been that successful. On their first operation, which received little press coverage, the ground units walked into a Viet Cong ambush and were "clobbered", as the officials here say softly.

2. The U. S.-Vietnamese Special Forces. They are assault troops which use the naval craft to get into battle. But, more than that, I think we could use them in the story to paint a picture of what the Delta is like at flood-time. It's really beyond the imagination or experience of any American who hasn't seen it. The floods came up to the tops of the trees last year and the Special Forces camps virtually floated away. (The Viet Cong were flooded out too). So, this year the Special Forces hope to make the water work for them. They have constructed the floating base camps Andy Jones mentioned. These are not floating bases which carry them into battle; this is where they live once returning from operations. A description of them would itself show the tactical difficulties of operating militarily in this area.

The camps are floated on empty oil drums and thousands of them have been dumped from low-flying aircraft into their perimeters. In some camps, the Special Forces operations buildings and barracks float, so that as the water rises, so does the building. But this takes too many oil drums. So, now they're constructing their buildings so that only the floors float when the waters rise. Their mortars need more stable platforms, so they have placed these inside giant cement cylinders.

The floods create bundles of other humorous, human problems too. The American Special Forces decided to build two-story thatch homes for the dependents of their Vietnamese irregulars, so that when the floods came they wouldn't stream into their camp. But, because Vietnamese babies don't wear diapers, the families living on the first floor were getting increasingly damp and furious. So, the Americans built more houses, letting one family live on the first floor most of the year, but moving them up to the second floor when the floods arrived.

There's so many other stories like this that the Special Forces base camps in the Delta may be more colorful than the Riverine Force. If the Plain of Reeds operation fizzles as a lead, we might use the Special Forces as the lead to describe the life and difficulties in the Delta--and then roll into the new type of U. S. river operations.

This is already a complex piece, but there are several other interesting points that might be mentioned. One is the American inter-service rivalry. The U. S. Marines are furious at the Army for taking over this type of amphibious warfare operation. They view this as part of a long-standing plot by the Army to take over the Marines' functions and then to get rid of the Marines altogether.

There's also the Mekong River, which by agreement is an international waterway. This means foreign ships can travel the river through South Vietnam to Cambodia, under escort of the Vietnamese Navy. These ships in the past have included Polish, French, British, Panamanian, including some who called in North Vietnam enroute to Cambodia. The Vietnamese government, which does not inspect the ship's cargo, charges that these crews are dropping parcels of weapons and ammunition overboard as they move upstream. More than that, once they get right across the South Vietnamese border into Cambodia, they stop and unload their cargoes onto sampans and then at night float them back into South Vietnam. There's a Special Forces border camp where one can watch this. If you'd like me to spend more time on the article, this might well be worth waiting to see first-hand.

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These would be the main points that I think should be investigated, although we'd have to prune out alot of the material.

I hope to hear from you soon. If you're interested in this piece, I'd want to spend alot of time on the Delta operation which begins in September.

My thanks for considering this. Please give my best regards to Andy Jones and David Reed, if you should see them.

Sincerely yours,

(Miss) Beverly Deepe