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## Riverine: A Brown Water Sailor in the Delta, 1967

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Whether or not this event really happened, and whether or not it just appears up-front to grab reader interest, the incident opens doors into big agendas in national security affairs. While the United States has foresworn assassination of tyrants as a matter of foreign policy, conflict once initiated opens the door to legitimate high-tech "bozo busting" that the world may applaud morally because it looks like a shortcut to peace. But "bozo busters" are available to perhaps thirty-five nations. What happens when, say, the government of Iraq, Libya, North Korea, or Cuba, or a breakaway group in a crumbling nation-state buys one and defines the occupant of the White House, or of Number 10 Downing Street, as a "bozo"? International relations might return to an era when Trojan horses were in season, when Asian and European monarchs eliminated their foreign rivals by planting assassins within their diplomatic units at the enemy king's court. Might war-weary cultures demand a return to the practice of Pacific islanders, as portrayed by anthropologist Ruth Benedict, where one warrior paddled seaward in a canoe to become the token victim? Or to the Roman Empire's policy of sending a general to fall upon his own sword in the opponent's capital as a token of capitulation? The idea of specifically targeting leaders, even stripped of its high-tech glamour and factors of moral hubris, invites careful thinking by national security leaders; Triumph Without Victory does well to open the topic for

This is the volume of choice for those who seek a critical, objective, and balanced view of this war.

> RUSSELL RAMSEY Albany, Georgia

Sheppard, Donald. Riverine: A Brown Water Sailor in the Delta, 1967. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1992. 326pp. \$22.95

Commander Don Sheppard has presented an engaging and, for this reviewer, evocative account of riverine warfare in the Mekong Delta just prior to the North Vietnamese Tet offensive of 1968. Sheppard grips his reader with alternate feelings of frustration, bravado, and tragedy that maintain the story's intensity from beginning to end.

However engaging Sheppard's story is, categorizing the genre is a more difficult task. The initial impression, that of a good sea story, is underscored by Sheppard's reluctance to identify those "characters" of questionable dedication or integrity he encountered during his year-long command of River Division 51. Yet dismissing this work as simply a good yarn would be a mistake, for like Mark Baker's Nam, Sheppard's experiences and observations constitute a valuable historical record for this most enigmatic of American wars. Traditional historical practice might regret the lack of documentation or the absence of an index, but modern oral history

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transcend such formalities, and so it is with Sheppard's book.

Those familiar with the body of literature on Vietnam will recognize a number of current themes characterizing the debate about this checkered war. Perhaps the most striking is Sheppard's ability to breathe life into the Johnson administration's technological imperative that is so clearly defined in James Gibson's The Perfect War. Unlike Gibson, however, Sheppard, forced to fight his way down the Bassac River under enemy fire while frustrated by official indecision, makes no apology for his pragmatic technocracy. Like any good sailor, he is there to do his job with the tools provided.

One may dislike Sheppard's tendency to define in black-and-white terms his task of interdicting the Vietcong: Ho Chi Minh, for example, is presented in typically Cold-War terms as an evil opponent of freedom, while the Vietcong are merely ruthless thugs. Sheppard believes that the imbalance of firepower and his willingness to employ extreme force was justified by this attitude. Yet he is a man of some conscience, asking the reader to understand the frustrations leading him to actions he recognizes as irrational brutality.

Sheppard admires courage and decisiveness in Americans and Vietnamese with fine impartiality and is equally disdainful of ambivalence and indecision that cost lives. A "mustang" (commissioned from the ranks),

he leaves a nagging impression that https://sdichalindecisionsnwaslu/nostropics/abens/iss2/17

among professional staff officers, while the war in the Mekong was fought largely by a handful of savvy enlisted men. Experience suggests there is some truth to this observation.

One should not read this book expecting to find a definitive history of Operation Game Warden or even a concise explanation of riverine operations. Nor is there any attempt to place Riverine Division 51 within the purview of general U.S. policy in Vietnam or, thankfully, within the larger context of the Cold War itself. Yet in many ways Sheppard's account does reflect all the conflict and contradiction of a seemingly bygone era. Still, it remains a very personal testimony about the futility and near anarchy of prosecuting any war in the absence of clearly defined and fully supported national goals---a lesson perhaps all the more valuable as superpower confrontation gives way to regional conflicts.

Finally, *Riverine* is a good story, especially for someone who spent a year in the general vicinity of Binh Thuy. Its action is unrelenting, and for this reason alone the book should have a restless life on most library shelves.

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Prados, John and Stubbe, Ray W. Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh. Boston: Houghton Mifflin,
7 1991. 551pp. \$29.95