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DEAR GORDON -

BETSY THOUGHT THAT YOU  
WOULD LIKE READING THIS  
ARTICLE - SO I AM  
FORWARDING IT ALONG.

BEST REGARDS -

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'R. Kidder', with a horizontal line underneath.

# Backtracking in Brown Water

BY ROLLAND KIDDER

Onetime allies reunite for a pilgrimage to another time, when as comrades-in-arms in Vietnam they patrolled 'The River' together.

**T**his odyssey began 40 years ago. I was on the back of Thu Trung Van's motorbike heading north on Highway #1 from My Tho in the Mekong Delta toward Saigon; we were on our way to dinner with his family. It was January 1970, and the war was raging as we drove. A helicopter air strike was visible to the west; the two-lane road was clogged with jeeps and military vehicles of all kinds.

Today, Thu and I are in a Japanese-made SUV heading south on the same road, which is now a four-lane highway lined with factories, commercial shops, and industrial parks. It now is called Highway #1-A. Near My Tho, we stop at a fancy restaurant Thu says "is run by the government." "Saigon Tourist" buses are pulled up outside. Inside, Australians at the next table are traveling on what brochures call the "three-day

Mekong Delta tour." The tour groups are headed for boat rides on small canals, with a final stop at the floating market in Can Tho. Our destination this day, however, is a small village called Quoi An on the Mang Thit River—a river that Thu and I patrolled on U.S. Navy PBRs (patrol boat, river) in 1969.

PBRs, for those who rode and lived in them, are unforgettable. Made of fiberglass and just 32 feet long, they were relatively fast, having two water-jet pumps powered by two diesel engines. Very maneuverable, they could stop or turn on a dime. For their size, they also carried a lot of armament—twin .50-caliber machine guns fore and a single .50-cal. aft, sometimes an added 60-mm mortar or an M-60 machine gun. As an integral part of what was referred to as the Brown Water Navy, PBRs were designed specifically for patrolling





COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The author (at right in both photos) with his friend Thu Trung Van. The photo at left was taken in 1969 on board a PRB on the Mekong River. The pair in January 2010 visited the Vinh Te Canal at the Cambodian border (below) where decades earlier their task was interdicting the flow of enemy troops and supplies.



the shallow inland waterways of Vietnam, searching for contraband and engaging the enemy in areas such as the Mekong River Delta. (PBRs were featured prominently in the film *Apocalypse Now*.)

The Achilles' heel of the PBR was its vulnerability—it had no armor plating. If a B-40 rocket (a Russian-made, shoulder-fired weapon) hit the boat, everyone on board likely would receive shrapnel wounds and the probability was high that someone would be killed. The enemy knew that. Each boat carried a crew of four, and boats worked in pairs, each serving as a cover boat for the other. An officer or senior petty officer on board one of the boats acted as the patrol officer. In 1969 the Navy had begun turning over PBRs to the Vietnamese, part of a process called “Vietnamization” that was aimed at putting a larger share of the warfighting burden on the South Vietnamese. I was a patrol officer, and was tasked with helping train men such as Thu in PBR operations.

Now, 40 years later, Thu and I, armed with my old topographic maps, are headed back to another time—and the place we had met—patrolling what we had simply called “The River,” the watery maze that is the Mekong Delta.

### Reverie in a Riverside Churchyard

From My Tho, the highway has four lanes all the way to Vinh Long, where we cross the Mekong on a spectacular suspension bridge. After some fender-to-fender motor-

U.S. NAVY

*U.S. Navy river patrol boats (PBRs) cruise past an island in the Bassac River in South Vietnam in 1968 on the prow for enemy positions in the area. The PBRs were a key part of the so-called Brown Water Navy that operated in the vast maze of the Mekong River Delta.*

bike traffic in Vinh Long, the road narrows and becomes bumpy as we move past myriad terra-cotta-brick factories and finally arrive at the ferry crossing of the Mang Thit. Thu negotiates with some shop vendors. Soon, at a rental cost of about \$25, we are on a motorized sampan heading downriver.

I have with me a photo from 1969 of an old French church we would like to visit. After just a couple of miles it comes into view. We scramble ashore. Thu interprets as we talk with a family living next door. The family appears to be poor. The house is small but has electricity, and one of the Honda motorbikes ubiquitous to Vietnam is parked outside. One of the sons, in his twenties, has a cell phone; we exchange contact information. He and his family have lived in this place for only five or six years. An older neighbor who had been in the area during the war stops over. We exchange a few generic stories about days gone by.

The last time I was in front of this old church was 1969. We were trying to stop enemy activity along the river here. The Viet Cong had been taxing boat traffic, thus restricting the movement of goods on the river. We had been informed that the area around the church had been booby-trapped, and so our naval forces had made no effort to go ashore here. Yet one night, I had dropped off Army Captain Robert Olsen at this very spot. Olsen was a Ranger on his third tour of duty. He had been working with a special South Vietnamese army unit trying to pacify the area.

## Journey into the Past in a Changing Land



Our boat put Olsen ashore just after dark, and by prearranged signal, we returned to pick him up at around 0300. In the interim, he squatted in front of the church, dressed and armed like the enemy—black pajamas and an AK-47—and waited. He spoke Vietnamese relatively well. Sometime during the night a guerrilla fighter approached, thinking him a compatriot. “Hello, comrade,” he said. Olsen killed him with a pop flare. We heard no gunfire that night.

It was brutal, personal warfare of the type often employed by the enemy, and Olsen was as good at it as they were. Within a couple of weeks of operations like that, enemy activity in the area decreased substantially; I credit a lot of that to Olsen’s tactics. War is a nasty business. Over three tours in Vietnam, Olsen saw a lot of it and also knew how to dish it out. He was killed later, but not in combat. He died in a boating accident during night operations on the river. He had been thrown into the water when his own boat was swamped, and was killed when another gunboat struck him. His body was recovered the next day, caught in a fisherman’s net. I went to the Army base at Vinh Long for his memorial service. Today the old French church on the Mang Thit River where he operated that night long ago is in use again, served by a priest from a nearby parish.

### New Generation Learns of the Past

Life along the river has changed. There are more and bigger houses, many sprouting TV antennas. Electricity is everywhere. The boat traffic also has grown, both in volume and in the size of the watercraft. There are still small boats filled with produce, but they are dwarfed by huge

barges filled with sand and aggregate going to Ho Chi Minh City or to construction sites throughout the delta. The river itself, however, is the same. The brown water flows two ways with strong currents, depending on the tide; it is filled with lotuslike weeds that clog propellers and water intakes.

As our sampan approaches the village of Quoi An, the view is reminiscent of the old days, but there is a new, enclosed marketplace. Forty years ago there was a single television set in town—in a small, open-air pavilion in the market area. I vividly remember going to the village on 21 July 1969 as we started a patrol. That one television set was showing images of U.S. astronauts on the moon. There was commotion among those watching. I asked a South Vietnamese officer with us what the fuss was about. He said: “They don’t believe it is happening. They think it is just some kind of trick that the Americans have put up on the television!”

At the village market I show some villagers a photo I have of U.S. Army and Navy personnel pouring concrete and paving the marketplace in 1969. Soon a large crowd has gathered to examine the photos, pointing out friends and family members who were there at the time. There is a copier somewhere in the village, and periodically the photos disappear for a short time and then are returned. Today half of the population of Vietnam is under the age of 35; this crowd reflects that. Maybe half a dozen people remember the time of the Americans, but most are younger people who weren’t yet born. Foreigners don’t often visit this small village, and everyone wants to ask questions. We feel very welcome.

We leave on an upbeat note and head across the river to continue our trip, reminded—uncomfortably—of another thing that hasn’t changed about the Mekong Delta. It is

mid-afternoon and the heat and humidity penetrate everything. We are eager to get back to our air-conditioned car. I recall David Halberstam's novel *One Very Hot Day*, about a day in the life of a U.S. Army adviser in 1965 on patrol in this area of the country. It is still that way in the delta. The heat grips you and won't let go.

### A Niche in a Global Economy

For two or three hours, we drive north and west toward the Cambodian border and the Vinh Te Canal, another area where American boats were deployed, in this case for the purpose of slowing down and trying to stop North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration as troops moved from their Cambodian sanctuaries into South Vietnam. We cross the southernmost large channel of the Mekong—the Bassac River—on a ferry at Vam Cong and continue upriver. As we enter the city of Long Xuyen, the appearance of the highway changes significantly: It now has a median, filled with grass and flowering plants. Thu explains that this is probably the richest province in the delta in terms of rice and other agricultural production “so the government has more money to put into the roads.” We find a nice hotel in the city (the rooms are \$25 per night) and dine at a local Vietnamese restaurant for about \$7 each, which includes the cost of local beer. The price of food and other items is reasonable and doesn't seem to have changed much since the war.

In the morning, as I walk into the hotel restaurant, I spot a Caucasian working on his laptop computer. “Are you an American?” I ask. “No,” he replies, “I'm from Denmark.” I ask what brings him to Vietnam. “This area of Vietnam is one of the global centers of the commercial fish-farming business,” he says. I recall the numerous factories advertising themselves

as fish-processing plants along the road on our trip upriver to Long Xuyen. The Dane further explains that his company is in the food-packaging industry. It sells boxes that hold 20 pounds of frozen fish and can be shipped all over the world. “The next time you order a fish sandwich at McDonald's,” he smiles, “the chances are it came from Vietnam.”

It is hard to grasp how all of that gets done, but somehow the Vietnamese have figured out a way to raise the fish, get it processed, frozen, and on a container ship to Long Beach or Oakland, California, where it is made into fishsticks or fishburgers, and we Americans buy it for lunch for \$2.39. My next question: “What happens if the freezer unit on the container fails?” He laughs. “First of all, you wouldn't want to be the guy who has to clean it up! But they don't often fail. Each container of fish is worth about \$70,000, so they make the units not to fail.” I marvel a bit at having met a Danish businessman, selling food-packaging materials, at a hotel in a remote village such as Long Xuyen. It is all a part of what I am finding to be the new Vietnam.

### Bittersweet Memories of a 'Home' Afloat

About 50 kilometers farther up the Bassac River is Chau Doc, a relatively large city near the Cambodian border. In 1969, a large barge anchored in the Bassac near here was the center of operations for our boats. The barge bore the Navy designation YRBM-20 (yard, repair, berthing, and messing). It was a place offering refuge and resupply to our small boats after patrols down the nearby Vinh Te Canal. Topside, the YRBM had landing pads for helicopters, but more important to us were the maintenance and supply facilities for PBRs and air-conditioned berthing areas. Most popular, however, was the “beer barge,” a smaller craft that officers and men had purchased and tied up alongside the “mother ship.” Alcohol could not be served in Navy vessels, but there was no regulation about privately owned barges being tied to a ship. So every night after dinner the words “beer call” were barked from a loudspeaker and we would all stream down a gangplank to the beer barge. YRBM-20 was, then, a little piece of America anchored about five miles from the Cambodian border and just a couple of miles from the Vinh Te Canal, where the war was always raging. It was a piece of home amid the realities of war that surrounded us.

One night while on board this air-conditioned ship, after a particularly sad and tragic set of events,

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COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*The author and his friend stopped to see this church, in a remote, rural locale of Vietnam, the site of a clandestine nighttime operation 40 years earlier. A young man whose family now lives next door posed in front of the building for the visitors.*



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

A PBR speeds along a border waterway in 1969, the mountains of Cambodia visible in the background. PBRs were fast and very maneuverable, critical assets to their mission. But they lacked armor, which made them and their crews vulnerable.

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I couldn't sleep so I stayed up writing an extensive diary entry. It gives a sense of that day, 17 November 1969:

It will be hard to get to sleep tonight. LTJG Jim Rost was killed tonight in a B-40 rocket ambush on the Vinh Te Canal. We were sitting there in the wardroom on the YRBM playing bridge. The opposition had just made a three no-trump bid and had made rubber. Commander Storms, with my help, had been steadily losing. Then the word came in of the attack and he had to leave. Bob Farr filled in at the table but our minds were no longer on bridge.

The movie was a complete bust: Gina Lollobrigida, Peter Lawford and guy who used to play "Bilko" on T.V. It was a poor comedy and made even more tasteless by the tragedy we had just heard about from Vinh Gia, our base camp on the Vinh Te Canal. By the second reel, word had come of one killed and several wounded. By the third reel, the buzzer blatted three times for the second dust-off medevac chopper coming in with wounded.

I wrote off the movie along with everyone else. We stood in silence below the flight deck of the YRMB-20, bending into the wind and watching a storm move in. The "helo" appeared out of the overcast heading in from Nui Sam Mountain, fought its way to the flight deck and touched down. There was a flurry of activity as stretchers moved with speed and ease from the bird down the incline to sick bay. Shortly thereafter, two seriously wounded Vietnamese sailors, having been temporarily treated by Doc Stank, were shuttled on stretchers back up to the waiting chopper for evacuation to the Long Xuyen hospital.

In an air of unreality, we all made ourselves busy—reading, playing solitaire, shining shoes—waiting for confirmation of the KIA. At 2330 I went up to NOC (Naval Operations Center) to see if there was any more word from Vinh Gia; it was coming in on the radio. Jim had been killed, remains to be flown to Binh Thuy in the morning. Duffelbag (snooping devices) sensors were needed to cover the ambush area, helo needed for the morning, etc. . . . in a sort

of sordid monotony the war drones on. We all felt the impact of Jim's death, but in our own way we trudged our separate paths, not denying but only camouflaging our own despair. . . .

Jim Rost was quiet. I remember him talking about the Navy a lot. He loved it; an engineering grad caught up in the technicalities of steam plants and engineering things. He thought he might stay in the Navy. He was an unassuming guy you would probably pass without noticing, but out on the river he was doing his job. Far from being a lover of war, you would more likely have found him ushering in church on a Sunday morning. His loss will be with us forever, though the depth of the wound can be known only by his family. Such incidents seem to cloud reality and tonight was a night of that.

### Canal With a Contentious History

The next morning we leave the hotel at Long Xuyen, bypass the central area of Chau Doc and drive southwest, directly toward Nui Sam Mountain. From there we make a beeline for Tinh Bien, a commercial town on the Vinh Te Canal. The canal has always had an importance here; it has been more than just a slice in the earth carrying water. Prior to the time of the French, this had been an area of struggle and conquest between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians. In 1814, in order to help establish a border and to encourage Vietnamese settlement, the Vietnamese government ordered the canal built. The French improved it, but the canal itself is testament to ancient hatreds between historic enemies.

It was along the same canal that South Vietnamese and Americans would attempt to establish border control against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in 1969 and 1970.

Cambodia had become a sanctuary for the stockpiling of arms and supplies for the communist forces fighting the South. At night, we could see lights from enemy activity in Cambodia, and we knew that somewhere along this canal they would be crossing into Vietnam. It was just a matter of where and when. Here the job of the PBRs was not patrolling, it was setting up ambush positions, which the Navy's deep thinkers in Saigon euphemistically called waterborne guardposts (WBGPs). Our job, as we floated on our stationary boat platforms at night, was to try to see the enemy before he saw us. The odds weren't good and fiberglass didn't provide much protection from bullets and shrapnel. The scenery was beautiful during the day, but it was not a place you wanted to be at night. After sundown, the Vinh Te Canal became the scene of firefights, of mortars and artillery barrages, and the feared B-40 rockets.

Today there is a bridge over the canal at Tinh Bien. You can follow the road to the Cambodian border, but it also takes you to what appears to be an industrial park with new metal buildings. We forgo Cambodia, instead staying south of the canal, continuing to move west toward our old bivouac and base camp at Vinh Gia. We move down a good two-lane road, complete with a center-stripe and bridges spanning recently constructed canals. Thu says some of the new canal-building is related to changes on the Mekong River. Impoundments and dams built upstream on the big river, combined with efforts to raise the banks of other canals and waterways, now affect the flow of water in this part of the delta. The new canals we see are essentially large irrigation ditches built to release water more quickly into areas once naturally flooded. We come to Vinh Gia, which is little more than just a widening of the road, with houses on both sides and electrical poles out front—the electrical grid now reaching to the very edges of the country. What I remember of the old Vinh Gia has vanished. There is no fort, no military outpost. Where the Vietnamese militia base stood there now is a school, and “downtown” is marked by an open-air bar and restaurant, where men are playing pool.

## Putting the Past in Perspective

A few kilometers past Vinh Gia, the road and canal make a slight bend to the right heading now directly west. Here, 40 years ago, we would always don flack jackets and helmets as we traveled through “Blood Alley,” the scene of many firefights and enemy crossings. Memories return—of friends who never made it home. Yet the beauty of the place remains overpowering; it could be a painting on a living-room wall. Rice fields, blue sky, and brown water, all framed by mountains in the distance—the gnawing beauty of the Far East is written all over it.

The history of this area impresses on me the lack of historical perspective I had 40 years earlier. No one had told us then of the longtime ethnic and nationalistic rivalries along this frontier. For us, the war was portrayed as “us against them,” the good guys vs. the bad guys. We had little understanding or appreciation of the centuries of conflict that had occurred along this border. In 1978, five years after the end of direct American participation in the war and three years after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam again was battling the Cambodians here and at the same time was in a war with its ancient enemy, China, along its northern border. Americans sometimes tend to define history in terms of when the first American arrives and when the last one leaves. The history of centuries before and what may lie ahead are not things on which we focus.

We also tend to forget how complicated war is, the cultural effects and legacies that are left, and, specifically, what happens to those who fought alongside us. I left Vietnam in 1970, but Thu and his fellow South Vietnamese fought on another five years. On 29 April 1975, at about 2100 hours, Thu and the officers in his division were assembled. Their commander said: “I have bad news. Up until today, we had been told that the fighting had been tough but that the war was going OK. However, we have just received a message from the army that they are surrendering to the North Vietnamese at midnight.” He told Thu and the others that he believed that living under the North Vietnamese would be intolerable, especially for those who had been leaders and military officers in the South. He planned to leave, with his family, and head for the South China Sea. There the commander and other refugees like him expected to be picked up by some of the larger ships of South

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COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*Navy barge YRBM-20, anchored near Chau Doc, South Vietnam, offered weary Sailors of the Brown Water Navy brief interludes of in-country R&R during the war.*



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*A young woman in native headcovering uses a computer in Phu Bai, a typical sight in a country that clings to tradition while embracing the future.*

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Vietnam's soon-to-be nonexistent navy in the hope that they could get to the Philippines—perhaps to the United States.

Thu had about three hours to make a life-changing decision. He went to his home in My Tho, discussed it with his wife and then, taking her, their two children, and a sister who was visiting from Saigon for the weekend, went back to the naval base. With as much food and water as they could carry, they boarded a small boat and headed downriver for the South China Sea. They eventually made it to the Philippines, then to Guam, and finally to a refugee camp at an old Army base at Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania. From there they settled in Jamestown, New York, where Thu worked nights and went to school days to earn a college degree. One can only wonder at what he and his family went through in those three short hours of 1975 on which hinged their entire lives. War often has unpredictable outcomes. Thu became an accountant, and an American citizen. He retired in 2004 after 25 years with Shell Oil Company in Houston, Texas.

### Once the Enemy, Now the 'Beloved'

The Vietnamese call Thu and others like him the *Viet Kieu*—overseas Vietnamese. When our Mekong trip was completed, we returned to Ho Chi Minh City and checked into a hotel where some of his *Viet Kieu* friends were staying. They were back in Vietnam visiting their families. One of them laughingly remarked, "They used to call us the enemy, but now they call us the 'beloved people!'" Approximately 4 million ethnic Vietnamese are scattered around the world, the largest group being in the United States. They send \$8 billion a year to their extended families in Vietnam. Now citizens of other countries, collectively they are among the largest contributors of foreign currency to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They have no problem getting visas to visit their homeland. As far as the Vietnamese government is concerned, they are beloved.

Throughout our visit to Vietnam, we were constantly amazed at the number of young people in the country. In private, they are quite willing to talk to Westerners. One young man, seated next to me on a Vietnam Airlines flight from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, reflected on the South, where he had grown up and where Americans had fought and died in a time before he was born. His name was Lam. He was dressed in a nice suit, carried a laptop computer, and spoke English well. When I asked him what his occupation was, he explained that he was "in the broadcasting



business" and worked for one of the private sports-cable channels in the country. I commented on how impressed I was with the television I had seen. In most hotels in Vietnam, at least 40 cable channels are available, including CNN, and there are four or five sports channels, most carrying soccer. He commented that the country had come a long way economically, especially so in telecommunications. However, like other young people I spoke with, he was guarded in assessing where the country is going. "You still need to have good connections in the North in order to get things done," he said, "and you have to remember that here the government blocks certain Web sites, including Facebook. We are not as open as you are in America and the West when it comes to the internet."

He seemed partial to the South, and his rationale became clearer as he spoke. His job in telecommunications had required him to move to Hanoi. "The South," he said, "is the economic engine for our country. More than 50 percent of our GNP (gross national product) comes from Saigon and the southern area, and I attribute a lot of that to the American influence back from the time you were here. Things work differently in the North," he explained. "If you pay someone in the North, usually nothing happens. At least in the South when you pay, you get something for your money. Things get done!"

As the plane approached Tan Son Nhat International Airport, we discussed the future and what it might hold for Vietnam. I brought up the fact that in Russia, after *glasnost*, Leningrad's name had been changed back to St. Petersburg. I mentioned that when I checked my luggage at the Hanoi airport, I had noticed that the three-letter airport code for Ho Chi Minh City remained "SGN"—as in Saigon—just as it had been when I was here 40 years ago. "Do you think," I asked, "that the city will ever again be called Saigon?"

"Maybe," Lam responded. "I don't know."

