

Vietnam's Waterway

Vietnam bordered on three side, the entire East coast, the Southern tip and a portion of the Western peninsula has hundreds of miles of coastline. Rivaling California in length and diversity of terrain. The mountainous Northern tier to the level flatten Southern regions. Fresh water emptying into the South China Sea varies from trickles washing off high rocky cliffs along the sea shore, to among the mightiest of rivers on this planet. Countless thousands of streams of differing sizes, intensity and length comb the countryside in dendritic and palmately patterns, where streams merge together, in their search for MSL (Mean Sea Level.)

For the coastal areas along the South China Sea, river mouths and the delta region of Vietnam, the boat was a more important mode of transportation than a gravel or hard surface roadway, needed by autos, buses, trucks, military convoys and tactical combat equipment. The natural rivers and navigable streams, with connecting man made canals provided many more miles of useful infrastructure than roadways. Then too, it was harder for the Viet Cong to lay mines in streams and rivers, than on roadways. Thus especially in the delta area, streams and wayways were the most efficient mode of travel. Boats of every size, shape and description was in use.

The delta, being only a few feet above sea level, the tides played an important feature in the routine lives of the local people. This natural celestial daily occurrence, left many boats grounded, during low tide. At high tide any ditch or depression was covered with water often harboring clams, mussels and some fish, for the delta folks to harvest. The Vietnamese, for centuries have lived with the tidal system and comprehended the events taking place and took advantage of the rise and falling water levels. Their homes show the delta people also envisioned the monsoon rains and flooding conditions, along the Mekong River and its many tributaries from the Himalayas, as it flowed through Vietnam to the South China Sea.

Few bridges crossed streams. The Vietnamese had a system of ferry boats to carry passengers and cargo between towns and villages along major streams or rivers. The ARVN Ruff/PUFF (Regional and Popular Forces) sometime operated pontoon bridges to cross a stream. Some were powered by outboard motors, other had ropes, enabling vehicles to get on the ferry. The passengers then pulled on the ropes to cross a stream. I remember once pulling ourselves across one stream using the pontoon bridge.

Slide 1&2 Saigon's New Port Bridge was the largest bridge I saw or crossed in Vietnam. This bridge marked in the delta 30 years ago is the second biggest bridge I saw in three years

Slide 3-12 Aerials of meandering streams and rivers criss crossing the Vietnam landscape.

Slide 13-16 An ARVN RUFF/PUFF (Regional and Popular Forces military pontoon bridge used to cross a river in Vietnam.

Slide 17-23 Low tide with low water and boats grounded along the shore. The tide reached to Saigon. House boats and trade boats would have to wait until high tide to float again.

Slide 24-31 has fishing in various forms. showing corralled lily pads to attract fish. nets placed across a feeder stream men bringing in a net from a house boat and working to get the netted fish out of the net. People netting for fish during high tide in a small ditch and depression along with man fishing using a pole.

Slides 32-34 depict the man made canals dug to improve the infrastructure of the delta, by connecting different rivers or large streams.

Slide 35-36. One of a fuel barge with laundry hanging outside to dry, that travelled up and down the river and Mekong selling fuel as gas and diesel to water front villages. The other river ferry transported cargo and passengers between town and villages on the Mekong River in the Vietnam Delta.

Slide 37-39 shows areas where flooding often occurs and the houses are built on stilts above the high water marks.

Slide 38-46 show wide rivers from Chi Lai South of Da Nang to the delta Mekong River between Long Xuyen and Nuy Sap. Large rivers were up and down the Vietnam country.

Slides 47-55 have smaller streams with less population living on the stream or making a living directly from the river.

Slide 56-74 Has crowded conditions with many sampans, house boats, and cramped living space along the canals and streams. Some boats are tied up two or three boats deep. Most look like they are just trying to find a place to dock.

Vietnam's Waterways

The Vietnamese used many methods of catching fish. The most important element was to keep the fish alive, once caught. They used fishing poles. They had fish traps, using a cone about two feet long, made of bamboo and metal frame. By placing the small pointed cone end down stream, the fish would swim into the cone and be trapped. Few fish can swim backward, and the downstream current would hold the fish in place. The Vietnamese used small two person operated nets to catch fish and larger one from house boats. They placed bamboo poles around lily pads to hold the lily pads in place as a means to attract fish to the lily pads.

William Foulke
William Foulke
DASPO MACV Photographer
Written Oct 2004

PS. The last time I was in Vietnam in the fall of 1971
they were using Series 741 MPC I think. It was 740 something
Therefore they must have had a second MPC exchange between
Feb, 9, 1969 and and 12 Oct 71