

Skimming History

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- In the 27 August 2004 *Chicago Sun-Times* op-ed article, columnist Robert Kovak interviewed retired Rear Admiral William L. Schacte, Jr. The interview included Schacte's 1968 experiences with small boats or "skimmers" during his tour in Vietnam. Schacte proclaimed he, as a lieutenant (junior grade), invented the tactical use of skimmers in Vietnam. Kovak wrote, "Schacte described the use of the skimmer operating very close to shore as a technique that he personally designed to flush enemy forces on the banks of [the] Mekong River so that larger swift boats could move in."

With respect to the admiral's memory, this claim seems historically inaccurate. A check of Proceedings indices produced an August 1974 article written by then Coast Guard Lieutenant J. F. Ebersole. Titled simply, "Skimmer Ops," Ebersole discusses, in some detail, the first use of small boats in this matter. The first tactical use of Boston Whalers by a deployed combat unit was not by the Navy but by Coast Guard Vietnam forces. After all, the Point-class 82-foot patrol boats (WPBs) arrived in Vietnam with one 14-foot Whaler on deck in their boat cradles. Powered by a 40[35]-hp Mercury outboard motor, these small boats were used extensively to board sampans and make forays into areas where the depth and width of the water precluded the use of the WPBs. However, they rarely worked without support. Ebersole also noted the Coast Guard regularly cooperated in operations with various Vietnamese coastal groups with U.S. Navy advisors.

The Coast Guard began using its small boats in this manner in 1965, about six months before the first Navy swift boat (PCF) arrived in Vietnam and about ten months before Naval Forces Vietnam invented itself. The Coast Guard makes no historical claim to have designed skimmer operations. These types of operations are as old as the service-eight years older than the U.S. Navy. During the last decade of the 18th century, throughout the 19th, and to the present, small boats are the Coast Guard's area of expertise in war and peace. Wartime small boat operation stories are replete from the Seminole Wars in Florida. These hold eerie likenesses to operations in Vietnam, from the transport of troops to enemy villages to the establishment of listening posts-and the Coast Guard was there as well.

As far as Schacte's memories, they could be the products of the historical contrariness encountered nationwide over the last months. These discussions, to put it loosely, have generated a profusion of memories among many that do not match the facts. This also points out that personal memory of historical events must be tested for accuracy. I would like to see a greater involvement by all the veterans of Vietnam naval service in accurately recording that history. Far too many claim, "We know what we know and no one can tell us differently." Yet some will disdain any attempt to create a comprehensive and accurate accounting for the future, and not necessarily for contemporary use. This was the point of my August 2002 article in *Proceedings*, "History Is Part of *Semper Paratus*," about the overall lack of historical knowledge in the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard has similar difficulty getting beyond the personal memory stage of historical knowledge.

Some say the great leaders in history kept an eye on what history would have to say of them and conducted themselves in that manner-others are more careless. When students of history read the accounts of the previous months, what will they think? What sources will they consult to strip the hyperbole from fact? What will be their measure of historical relevance? What information will be available to prevent the exemplary service of a group of men from becoming political grist and dividing them into opposing camps?

Admiral Schacte, instead of relying upon memory, should call upon his peers of service and of rank to invest their influence for a call for a comprehensive history, from official and unofficial researchers and writers, of all the various naval activities, including the Coast Guard, in Vietnam.

Although there has been contentiousness among some veterans' groups, perhaps when the cause is removed one way or the other the groups will reunite and begin to record the history as it should be. Accurate history does not occur by accident. It requires the same hard work, planning, and dedication used to make the naval war in Vietnam one of the few successes of that conflict. U