

**A Sample Reading From
Quester, A Story of the River Warriors
By Robert C. Powers**

It was 2145. The sun had set. The PBR had cruised up river past a thick sugar cane field near the Rach Thien Canal. Ben had cut the engines on the PBRs to listen. The boat drifted lazily in the current. Harry Quester stood quietly on the starboard side of the river boat on top of the engine compartment, holding a M-16 rifle. The boat engineer, Petty Officer Third Class Herman Most, was laying asleep on the port side engine compartment next to the amidships M-60 machine gun station. Jaw Jackson was sitting on the after deck next to the .50 caliber machine gun with the mortar tube slung underneath. The Coxswain stood quietly in the Coxswain Flat. Lieutenant Ben Bones stood in the Patrol officer's station on the starboard side next to the Coxswain. Harry knew that there was one other man manning the forward twin .50 caliber machine guns. The night was quiet, and all he could hear was the lapping of the river as it ran past the boatand the whine of mosquitoes. The rest of the crew, except for the Coxswain and Lieutenant Bones, napped in the bottom of the boat. Harry swatted a mosquito and glanced nervously around him to see if he had made too much noise killing it. Ben Bones was staring intently at the shadows on the river. The other patrol had disappeared up the river. Harry could barely make out the outline of the ASPB that was with them. Sweat trickled down Harry's forehead, and ran into his eyes. It stung. The helmet was heavy on his head. It was hot inside the flak jacket. The flak trousers were cinched up around his balls, and every time he moved, it cut into him. Sonofabitch! He'd be glad to get into a firefight just to relieve the discomfort he was in. Harry swatted another mosquito. He began to track each one in to his ear by the doppler of the whine. Goddam! You can think about the damndest things out here! The men probably thought he was thinking great tactical thoughts, and here he was thinking of his discomfort and calculating the approach speed of mosquitoes. He set his jaw, ignored the bugs, and stared out into the gloom, looking for any sign of movement.

"Bugs is bad, ain't they, Lieutenant?" said Jaw Jackson, sleepily.

"Yeah," said Harry

"Yes Suh.....we jus' havta grow tougher skins."

"That'll take some doing."

"Yes Suh.....but these skeeters are little guys. The big 'uns start their glide path three miles out," observed Jaw.

"Those are really the big ones," smiled Harry.

"But them damn black flies is the worst. One son'bitch bit off my nose.....I swatted him three times and he just rolled over and laughed at me. He was so used to biting buffalo ass that my nose was jus' a snack!"

Harry laughed silently. He appreciated Jaw trying to break the tense monotony. The PBR's engines restarted, and the boat began to plow upriver again. The river became darker as the sticky minutes ticked by.

Harry Quester watched Lieutenant Ben Bones as he looked at the luminous dial of his watch. Strange man, thought Harry. He wins the Silver Star for bravery, but smokes pot with his men and chases the village baby sans. Some of the men loved him. Chief Hazard Smith was open in his disdain for him. But then, eleven months out here on the rivers had to do something to you, thought Harry. Ben Bones was an ex-enlisted man.....a mustang. He was older than most Lieutenants, and was fiercely proud of his commission. Ben was known as the best RIVDIV Commander in the Delta. That's why he got the assignment to move up the small rivers first. Hazard Smith said that Bones changed after the firefight in which he got the Silver Star. Three of his men had been killed that night near Ben Luc. God only knows what he may have been through.

Harry moved close to Ben Bones and spoke in a low voice.

"Ben.....do ya know anything more about Tony?"

"Naw," said Ben, moving away from Harry.

Harry stepped closer. "Would you tell me what happened that night.....up the canal?"

"What the fuck is this? Its no concern of yours, Quester!"
said Bones.

Harry was persistent. "Tony is my best friend, Ben.....and I want to help."

"Look, Quester," said Bones, "Zee was doing his duty.....I was doing mine.....and he got greased....or caught...or whatever, I don't know. It happened, and now we got more to worry about than that!"

"Why did you leave him behind, Ben?" asked Harry directly, his voice hardening.

"Quester," said Bones, his voice harsh, "shut the fuck up.....just shut the fuck up! We are on a combat mission.....and that's an order!"

Ben turned away and began talking in low tones to the Boat Coxswain. Harry contained his thoughts and leaned back.

It was 2230, the time they had agreed to cut their engines and drift downriver. Ben made a throat slitting motion to the Coxswain, who immediately shut down the engines. The PBR surged forward for a few seconds, and then the current caught the bow and swung it downriver.

"Where do you estimate we are?" asked Harry.

"About four clicks north of the My Qui Canal, I'd say," said Ben. "Ya screwed, lazy looper?"

"I'll do the job, Ben. How long before you estimate we'll be at the canal?" said Harry.

"I'd say about 2330 or so," said Bones.

Harry was tired and his mind drifted with the boat as it floated lazily down the river in the dark. Harry caught the smell of the marijuana in the air. He peered through the darkness and saw that the Boat Engineer, Petty Officer Most, had lit up a joint.

"Put that goddam thing out," hissed Harry.

"Sir?" said Most disbelievingly.

"Naw...it's okay, Herman....." said Bones, lighting up his own marijuana cigarette. "Ya see Mr. Admiral's Aide, I always let the men have a joint before we might get into combat..helps 'em fight better!"

"Bullshit.....it slows down the reflexes," said Harry.

"Come on, Man, relax it some," said Jaw, lighting up a joint.

"This is really fucked up," said Harry. "Ben.....knock it off, or...."

"Or what.....gonna tell the Admiral? Well, fuck you, lazy looper! And the Admiral too! Sonofabitch is nuts sending us up these goddam narrow rivers! He's gonna get us wiped slick up here one night!"

"He knows what he's doing, Ben." said Harry.

"Yeah?.....Well I don't see his ass out here tonightjust mine and yours, lazy looper!", said Ben.

"He's been on the rivers...you know that," said Harry.

"Just man that goddam weapon there and shut up.....and that's an order!" Ben laughed. "And all you Academy guys know what an order is, don't ya?"

Harry bit his lip and stared out over the black water.

The 34 boat drifted, the waves lapping at the side. About 100 yards upriver, they could make out the outline of ASPB 22 as it drifted with them. It was unusually dark. Harry adjusted his helmet. The thing was heavy. Beads of perspiration rolled down his forehead and into his eyes, stinging. He felt suddenly trapped into a situation in which he did not belong.

An hour passed. The boats drifted past the My Qui Canal without seeing anything. It was almost one o'clock, and they were getting close to Hiep Hoa.

"What was that?" whispered Harry Quester to Jaw Jackson. "Didn't heah anything, Suh," said Jaw.

"It was from over there.....north of the village... therethere it is again!" said Harry.

"All I can hear is the cheep cheep of the fuckin' jungleSir."

"Sounded like someone talking.....maybe."

Jaw strained to hear. But he heard nothing.

"You got some fine eahs if ya heah somethin' way ovah theah!" said Jackson.

"Maybe the Cong has set an ambush," said Harry.

"Relax, lazy looper," said Bones. "There ain't no fuckin' Indians out tonight.....we almost back to the base!"

"I think we should start engines and maneuver," said Harry. "We're too good a target out here!"

"You're just along for the ride, Quester....remember?" said Bones. And we're a lot better off silent than sounding off with the diesels too soon.....got it?"

"Okay, Ben.....okay," said Harry. Ben was probably right. The dark night had him spooked. "But listen over that way. Put the NODS over there and see what you can see."

Jaw Jackson grabbed the Night Observation Device and aimed it across the river. It took the dim light of the stars and amplified it to provide a picture outline of objects at night.

"Don't see nothing, Lieutenant," said Jaw Jackson.

The sound was unmistakable. A shrill whistle pierced the air. A flare popped over their heads. Tracer rounds pierced the night.

"Start engines." shrieked Ben.

The Coxswain hit the start button, and the engines growled and sputtered but did not start.

"Goddam Most," shouted Bones, "what's wrong with them fuckin' engines?"

Harry looked at Petty officer Most, who lay in the bottom of the boat, still puffing on a joint.

"Get up Most," shouted Jaw Jackson, "Get them engines going!"

"Fuck it, Man...." said Most, trying to get to his feet.

"Man....you done smoke too much a' that shit," said Jaw.

The twin fifty caliber machine guns on the bow of the PBR started firing at the source of the tracer rounds from the shore. Harry aimed the M-16 and squeezed the trigger, concentrating on holding the weapon steady at a hump in the dark treeline.

"Most, I'm gonna kick your ass," shouted Ben, and he started back toward the after cockpit.

Harry saw the fiery flicker out of the corner of his eye before he heard the sound. The 57 mm recoilless rifle round streaked toward the 34 boat and passed two feet above the gunwale just aft of where Harry crouched. It hit Ben Bones full in the chest, snapped his upper torso from the bottom part of his body and carried it for 10 yards beyond the boat where it hit the brown water and exploded in a bloody froth. Harry stared in horror as Ben's legs seemed to stand alone for a moment, the bottom part of his torso gushing blood upward in a fountain. He felt specks of hot blood hit his face. Then the legs folded and crumpled to the bottom of the boat. It was only as the legs

crumpled that Harry heard the sound of the rocket. Then, the PBR's engines rumbled into life and the Coxswain goosed the throttle. A B-41 rocket went right through the mid section of the PBR at the Coxswain's Station without exploding, severing the steering and throttle mechanisms as it crunched through the fiberglass hull. There was a shrieking, tearing, ripping sound, followed by a sharp detonation as the rocket exploded in the water 50 feet on the other side of the boat. Shrapnel flew across the river and made little whining, punching sounds as it hit the hull and threw up multiple small geysers of water. The PBR whined up to full speed, throwing a frothy white bow wave as it headed for the east bank at 25 knots. The Coxswain fought for control, but nothing responded. Harry held on to a stanchion on the port side and stared wide-eyed at the onrushing jumble of dead brush that groped out from the river bank at grotesque angles in the dark. The wind rushed by him as the boat sped to its destruction. As the bow of the boat touched the first bit of dead brush, Harry jumped. He saw Jaw Jackson jump at about the same time. It seemed to take forever to fall. The scene was frozen in time as he fell, ever so slowly into the brown water. The PBR hit the bank in slow motion, and ripped its way inland. Thirty feet up the bank, a fallen tree trunk stabbed into the bottom and ripped into the engine compartment, severing the fuel lines. Diesel fuel spurted out onto the engines as they ground across the tree trunk and rocks on the river bank. A spark from steel engine grinding on rock, like flint and steel, set it off. Flames leaped from the boat and ignited the fuel vapor that had risen from the wreck. There was a sharp ignition crack, and the boat exploded. The roar of the fire blotted out all sound around it. Fire leaped 100 feet into the humid night air and a dense cloud of black smoke rolled upward. Forty millimeter mortar rounds were the first to cook off, sounding like giant cherry bombs at a Fourth of July Fireworks display, followed by the .50 caliber machine gun rounds that put up a zigzagging tracer display in the sky. Harry came up from the surging water near the river bank, and was showered with falling debris from the exploding river boat. He gasped for breath and ducked back under the water, feeling the current grab him and beat him against the mud and debris that lined the bank. He struggled back to the top, fighting for breath as he found himself entangled in a mass of dead foliage that had fallen into the river. Suddenly, Harry felt the current dragging him under. He struggled and grasped at the entangling mass of dead foliage that dragged at him. His head went under the swirling brown water and his lungs began to burn as he fought to regain the surface. His head came up briefly, and he gasped for air as the debris whirled in the current and dragged him under again. He struggled to rid himself of the heavy flak armor. Strong arms grabbed at him and pulled him free of the brush. Harry struggled to the surface and saw the face of Jaw Jackson beside him in the water.

"I gotcha, Lieutenant.....but someone better got me real soon," said Jaw, spitting water. "I ain't much on this swimmin' shit!"

They floated together down stream toward Hiep Hoa. The image of Ben's lower torso gushing blood into the air seemed cemented in Harry's mind! God! Ben was dead. Ben was dead! Harry thrashed at the foul tasting, dead nippa palm leaves that clung to his head, and pulled himself free. The water surged around him, and he choked as a gasp for air resulted in a gulp of the water, which was covered with a floating brown scum from the rotting foliage. Harry choked and spit and fought the current as he felt them being swept out into the center of the river. Now he could hear the sounds of battle as it raged upriver from him. He could see the river boats swooping in to return fire, and then retreating to let Seawolf helicopters come roaring down and fire their rockets and machine guns at the Cong ambush site. Exploding rockets briefly lit up the eerie scene and Harry could see the PBR's and ASPB's illuminated against their glow. Got to get back to the RIVDIV! Gotta get back!

The sound of heavy caliber mortar rounds being launched nearby came through over the rush of the water around Harry Quester. He struggled to keep his head above water as the current carried him along. The light of fires burning along the shore where the PBR ran aground illuminated the water around him. He could make out the shape of an ASPB just ahead of him.

Mortar rounds arced high in the night sky and fell on the river boat base at Hiep Hoa. They were followed by the sounds of machine gun fire and the shouts of people in the village rolling across the water.

Harry could hear Hazard Smith shouting from the ASPB. "Goddam! What the hell is happening?"

"Here.....HERE.....HERE!.....HELP!" shouted Harry, swimming toward the ASPB.

"Jaw! We gotta get over there where that boat can see us," spluttered Harry.

"The goddam Base is being shot up," gasped Jaw.

"Over there....over there," shouted a voice from the ASPB, "men in the water!" It sounded like Seaman Hank.

All eyes turned toward Harry and Jaw. They bobbed in the current waving their arms. The ASPB turned toward them. As the ASPB pulled up alongside, many arms grasped them.

Harry Quester lay on the deck of the 22 Boat.

Seaman Hanks leaned over Harry. "Sir.....you wounded?"

"No.....No," stuttered Harry.

Hazard Smith peered down at Harry.

"Chief.....Ben's dead," shouted Harry. Suddenly he felt emotion choke him and nausea welled up in his throat.

Smith looked at the disheveled Lieutenant. "Are you alright, Sir.....are you?"

"Shit, I don't know!" choked Harry weakly. "But Bones is gone! Who's the next in command?" said Harry in a weak voice, rising to his feet and grabbing the side of the cabin to steady himself.

"I guess Mr. Zee is....I mean, I guess I am!" said Hazard Smith, seemingly astounded at his conclusion.

Mortars continued to fall on the Base at Hiep Hoa. Harry could see the other boats of the RIVDIV that had not been on patrol scrambling out of their moorings.

"Sonofabitch.....we're under attack..... and the base is too!" exclaimed Hazard Smith.

"We'd better get in there and give some help to the guys at the Base!" said Jaw, struggling to his feet.

Harry looked over toward Hiep Hoa. The village was illuminated by the flash of mortar rounds and the night was filled with the racing fire of tracer rounds.

"We go in there.....we'll lose all the fuckin' boats," shouted Harry.

Hazard Smith yelled up to the Coxswain. "Get over there to the Base.....and tell them other boats to follow us!"

Harry grabbed Hazard Smith by the collar and shook him. "No.....NO!....and that's an order! Head upriver!"

"What?" Chief Smith looked at Harry, fear and excitement flickering in his eyes.

"You heard me, Chief.....I'm the senior officer here...

now do what I told ya.....on the double!" shouted Harry, hearing his own voice as though he were standing aside watching the incredible scene.

Hazard Smith looked at Harry and hesitated. "But, there isn't anything up river.....go down river.....there's a small base at Tra Cu.....we can get fuel and ammo there."

"Up river Chief.....do as I say.....some sonofabitch has this trap all figured out.....don't you see?" shouted Harry. "They expect us to go downriver.....and there'll be an ambush party down there. Now give the goddam order!"

Hazard Smith shouted back to the Coxswain. "Belay my last order, Coxswain! Turn up river.....full speed.....and tell all the boats to follow!"

"Aye aye, Chief" responded the Coxswain.

The big ASPB heeled to starboard as it turned sharply away from the flaming base.

Harry groped his way to the Coxswain Flat.

"Where's the radio?" he shouted above the roar of the engine.

The Coxswain pointed to the bulkhead in front of him. There was a radio handset hanging there. Harry grabbed it and keyed the transmitter.

"Giant Slingshot, this is head hunter, over."

"Headhunter, this is Giant Slingshot.....what the hell is going on up there?"

Harry recognized the voice of Commander Stinger Nettles. He was aboard the Giant Slingshot Command Ship, USS Harnister County at Ben Luc.

Harry keyed the mike again.

"stinger! this is Harry.....the base at Hiep Hoa is under attack, and I'm evacuating the base with remaining boats and heading upriver!"

"Harry?.....is this Lieutenant Quester?" asked Nettles.

"Yes Sir."

"What the hell are you doing up there?"

"Never mind sir.....we've lost one boat....at least two dead.....Lieutenant Bones is dead."

There was a pause.

"Who's in command?" asked Commander Nettles over the radio.

Harry felt a thrill much like fear, but something beyond that, as he heard himself reply.

"I am.....Sir!"
