Indochina Monographs

Strategy and Tactics

by

Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung

U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY

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Indochina Monographs

This is one of a series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History. They were written by officers who held responsible positions in the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese armed forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors--not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

Preface

During the war years, the Republic of Vietnam and the United States pursued a common goal; their armed forces fought against the same enemy, under the same campaign plan, with the same weapon systems, and in the same environment.

The strategic approaches to fighting this war, however, evolved through several stages depending on the enemy's kind of warfare and force structure; so did the tactics designed to counter his large-unit and guerrilla activities. This monograph endeavors, therefore, to trace back and evaluate our strategic alternatives at each stage of the war and the evolving tactics employed, with particular emphasis on the period of American withdrawal and reduced support.

In the preparation of this monograph, I have expressly confined my discussions of strategy to its military aspect. While this conforms to the limited scope of a military subject, the encompassing nature of strategy, especially one conceived to face the enemy's approach to total war, implies that for a better understanding of military strategy, the interplay of social, political, and economic factors should also be brought in as a backdrop. Therefore, wherever appropriate, I have found it necessary to place strategic discussions in the total war context.

I am indebted to General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff — under whom I served several years as Assistant Chief of Staff J2, JGS — and Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff J3, JGS, for their valuable comments. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong,

Commanding General of I Corps and Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, Commander of the 3d Infantry Division, contributed thoughtful remarks and the practical view of field commanders.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy Staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
10 July 1978

Hoang Ngoc Lung
Colonel, ARVN

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

North Vietnam's National Objectives and Basic Strategy

The Geneva Accords concluded on 20 July 1954 divided Vietnam into two zones clearly demarcated along the 17th parallel. The North adopted a single-party, totalitarian, socialist regime while the South had a nationalist government in which pluralism and free enterprise were encouraged. The war that lasted from 1946 to 1954 had come to an end, and the political solution provided for by the Geneva Accords called for a general election to be held two years later to reunify the country.

Peace was necessary for North Vietnam to rebuild its society and heal the wounds of war; in the preceding years the North was the scene of the heaviest fighting of the war. The economy was a shambles; agricultural production fell short of the people's requirements (the annual shortage amounted to approximately 250 thousand tons of rice) and created a need for imports. Highways, bridges and railroads were in bad condition. Light industries, still in their infancy, were dispersed throughout the country. North Vietnam's military forces, which had so decisively defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, were strong but in urgent need of reorganization; they had been expanded greatly but irregularly during the war.

The task of rebuilding the country and consolidating its political power required more than two years for the northern leadership to accomplish. This is why South Vietnam's rejection of the 1956 general election occasioned only a diplomatic, though

strong, protest from the north.[1] North Vietnam's strategy during this period put emphasis on strengthening the society of the North rather than on taking action in the South. On *Tet* (New Year) 1957, Ho Chi Minh explained this strategy to cadres that had been regrouped from the South:

> "To build a long-lasting building, we must lay a solid foundation. The North is the foundation, the taproot of the struggle to liberate and reunify our country. Therefore, what we are doing in the North is for the purpose of strengthening both North and South. Thus, our work here is like the struggle in the South, for the South, and for all of Vietnam."

Meanwhile, the situation was deteriorating day by day for the Communists in South Vietnam. Out of 50,000 Communist cadres left behind in the South, only 10,000 members were still active by 1959. The remaining 40,000 either rallied to the South Vietnamese government or simply vanished; that is, moved away and quietly stopped operating for the Communists. It came to a point where a district level Communist cadre for example, had to serve both as District and Village Commissar. Sometimes there were no officers at all.

The growing South Vietnamese strength eventually forced the North to reexamine its strategy. In May 1959 at a general meeting of its Central Executive Committee, the Workers' (Communist) Party of North Vietnam decided upon the liberation of South Vietnam. The first step would be to infiltrate the South with cadres that had gone north in 1954. In order to do this, a logistics system would be required. Consequently, the North Vietnamese Army established Group 559 with the mission of directing and supporting the infiltration of men, weapons, ammunition and explosives into the South.

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[1] A communique issued by the South Vietnamese government on April 6, 1956 stated "The Government of the RVN respects the present state of peace. As has been stated many times, the Government of RVN desires to seek reunification of the country through peaceful means, especially through truly democratic and free elections when such free conditions obtain."

In September 1960, during its third General Assembly, North Vietnam's Workers' Party officially decided that the twofold strategic goal of the North would be (1) to carry on the building of socialism in the North and (2) to start the revolutionary war of liberation in the South. The liberation of the South was perceived as a long-term, arduous struggle at all levels. The aim was to establish, strengthen, and develop a popular front in the South that gave the appearance of a spontaneous movement by the people to overthrow the government. For that purpose, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam officially came into being on 20 December 1960.

The military strategy devised by North Vietnam called for a people's war to be fought through three stages: the stage of contention; the stage of equilibrium; and the general counteroffensive. In the stage of contention the strategy is defensive during which violent attacks on government installations are followed by immediate withdrawals to prepared positions. Guerrilla warfare is the dominant characteristic. In the stage of equilibrium, the insurgents have become as powerful as the government force, but remain on the strategic defensive while preparing for the stage of the general counteroffensive by making constant attacks to wear down the enemy and retake lost positions. In the final stage, the counteroffensive, the enemy is forced to defend and retreat in the face of mobile warfare, supported by the guerrillas who themselves are gradually transformed into mobile, regular formations.[2]

With this three-stage strategy as the framework, the Northern leadership promulgated a five-step plan in 1959 for the execution of the war against the South. (There was a doctrinal preference among the Communist ideologues to express all important endeavors in terms of five steps, as in five year economic plans, etc.) Step one provided for propaganda activity to lay the groundwork for the struggle. Step two was the organization of guerrilla forces and the establishment of base areas. In stage three the guerrilla units begin their local attacks. Stage

[2]For a full discussion of this three-stage strategy, see Truong Chinh, Primer for Revolt, Frederic A. Praeger, New York, 1963.

four called for more vigorous attacks and for the organization of regular forces. Finally, stage five was the large-scale counteroffensive by the regular forces.

The leaders and soldiers who were to carry out the strategy in the South were former Communist cadres and soldiers who had gone north in 1954. Travelling in small groups of 40 to 50, and later in larger groups of 300 to 500, they began infiltrating in 1959 following land routes leading from North Vietnam's Military Region 4 through lower Laos into Quang Tri and Quang Nam in the First Military Region and Kontum in the Second Military Region of the Republic of Vietnam.

Sea routes were utilized only by cadres on special missions in the South, such as intelligence personnel, and for transporting arms, ammunition and explosives. The fifteen vessels intercepted by the South in 1963 provided a general picture of the level of sea infiltration.

Once in the South, these infiltrators were sent to Communist-organized areas in accordance with needs and priorities, where they began to assemble regular armed units. In time these units grew from company size to battalions, and in 1961 the first two Communist regiments were organized in South Vietnam. At the same time, Communist guerrillas and their supporting infrastructure were developed, reaching a strength of 20,000 personnel in 1961. By 1963 nearly all of the Southern cadres had been returned to the South and North Vietnam began to infiltrate Northern cadres and troops.

At the end of 1964, taking advantage of the deterioration of the military and security situation caused by a period of political turmoil in the South, North Vietnam dispatched entire main force regiments southward. These regular units retained their unit integrity and the war had already been advanced from stage two to stage three. During the battle of Pleime in the highlands of the Second Military Region in October 1965, the 325th North Vietnamese Division was involved.

South Vietnamese National Objectives and Basic Strategy

Although North Vietnam in the post-Geneva era encountered numerous difficulties, South Vietnam was beset with even greater political problems as internal struggles wrecked the country. The situation was serious enough to prompt foreign observers to predict the demise of South Vietnam within two years after Geneva.

The Nationalist Army of Vietnam was in the hands of a Chief of the General Staff, Major General Nguyen Van Hinh, who was in open and hostile opposition to the government. The military units of the *Hoa Hao* and *Cao Dai* religious sects, as well as the National Police Force which was controlled by the *Binh Xuyen*, carved out their own fiefdoms and enjoyed near autonomy in their regions.[3]

After restoring the authority of the government and regaining control of the armed forces (Major General Hinh was replaced by Major General Le Van Ty) the government of Ngo Dinh Diem proclaimed the founding of the First Republic of South Vietnam on 26 October 1955. President Diem espoused the doctrine of personalism as a response to Communist dogma and embarked on a reorganization of the forces to meet the threat of invasion from the North.

In addition to internal strife, the new South Vietnamse regime was faced with tough problems of nation-building and the ever-present threat of North Vietnamese aggression. This threat weighed heavily on the minds of South Vietnamese leaders especially after President Diem flatly refused reunification through general elections. The fact was the defense posture of the South was so weak and its geographical position so vulnerable that North Vietnam had all the chances of success if it decided to strike.

South Vietnam borders on North Vietnam to the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west, and the South China Sea to the east. It extends 920 km from the 17th parallel to the north to Cape Ca Mau in the South. At its narrowest it is only 59 km wide; at its widest, 460 km. There are 2,400 km of coastline. Two thirds of South Vietnam consist of high plateaus with

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[3] *Binh Xuyen* was a society of organized crime that gained exceptional power under the French who permitted it to operate without serious opposition in the Saigon area in exchange for its support against the Viet Minh.

mountains rising to 2,841 meters; dense jungles offer concealment to invading forces. Plains take up the remaining one-third of the land area, the best known being the Mekong Delta, the water-logged rice basket of the South. Waterways navigable to sampans cover 2,080 km while 14,400 km of highways and 1,440 km of railroad form the main arteries of the transportation network. These geographical aspects meant that only a defense in depth was a feasible strategy for South Vietnam, and such a defense would require a large force with superior mobility.

The South's population in 1954 of over 14 million included about 70,000 people from 20 ethnic tribes living in the highlands, 900,000 Chinese concentrated mainly in Cholon, and 400,000 Cambodians in the Mekong Delta.

One significant characteristic of the South's population was the great differences in material well-being and political attitudes between the country people and the city dwellers. Leading a poverty-striken life, peasants had no choice but to adopt a passive attitude toward the war and submit to the direct control of the winning side, be it Nationalist or Communist. This fact was an extremely important factor in shaping the South's strategic defensive thinking, which included building and maintaining area defenses through a network of military fortifications and outposts.

National authority resides in the dual concept of territory and people. The jungles, although part of the territory, harbor little or no population, and therefore command less interest than populated areas and administrative units such as hamlets, villages, districts, and provinces. This explain why during the general offensive of the summer of 1972, the South was determined to recapture the provincial capital of Quang Tri, although it had then been reduced to a huge pile of rubble.

The concept of territorial protection and area defense became a strategic goal in the South's determination to withstand the North's aggressive military designs, to eliminate subversive activities within the South, and to build the republic. In other words, the objectives were survival and independence. In every political situation these remained the two most important objectives of the South.

The South's national goals and strategy were based on the assumption that full American support would be available until proven unnecessary.

This assistance was perceived as being part of the United States strategy which followed the end of World War II with respect to the containment of Communism in Asia as well as in Europe. The South regarded itself as a bastion of the Free World in its effort to resist the Communists.

To carry out the national defense effort, the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam were organized, trained and operated along conventional lines. This conventional form of the armed forces was apparent when the first South Vietnamese Army was established on 11 May 1950 with a strength of 60,000 men, half of whom were in the regular forces and the other half in auxiliary forces.

The first military officers were trained in local military schools and from 1950 on at the National Military Academy at Dalat. In 1951 the first classes of reserve officers began training in Nam Dinh and Thu Duc. The program of instruction was based on French training methodology and tactical doctrine. Organization of the military units as well as their armaments and equipment were also French. The inevitable result was that this conventional character of the armed forces had a profound influence on the subsequent conduct of the war since its military leaders were trained in conventional tactics. When the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was established in 1956 it continued the French practice of training the regular forces for conventional warfare. The tactics and techniques that American advisors passed on to Vietnamese officers were those that had been learned during World War II or in the Korean Conflict and were thus confined to conventional warfare. Although many Vietnamese officers had fought the Viet Minh, which required the use of unconventional methods, the doctrine upon which all training and operations were based in Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) continued to be that of conventional war. Even though the battlefield conditions seemed to demand a doctrinal change, this was never accomplished because the security situation—the press of daily operational requirements—never gave the RVNAF time to work out a more suitable doctrine.

While the period from 1954 to 1959 was sufficient for the North to strengthen its internal political system and armed forces, the same period saw the South torn by dissention and weakened by political instability. The aborted coup of 11 November 1960, attempted by three paratroop battalions, set a precedent for the repeated use of the armed forces

to seize power. Such attempts were successful twice — during the revolution of 11 November 1963 and the *coup* of 30 January 1964 — and forced South Vietnamese leaders to keep a close watch over the armed forces, to personally appoint and supervise the commanders of elite general reserve units such as the Airborne and Marine Divisions as well as the commanders of the key infantry divisions stationed in the Third and Fourth Military Regions.

The fear of *coups* affected the attitudes and methods of control used by all presidents and chiefs-of-state (except for the civilian Chief-of-State Phan Khac Suu who enjoyed no real authority); they insisted on the power to appoint commanders of corps and divisions mainly on the basis of personal loyalty, and required that direct orders from the Independence Palace were necessary for any significant deployments of units, especially those from the general reserve and those stationed around the City of Saigon.

The pervasive presidential distrust of the military eroded the armed forces' efficiency and created factionalism in the RVNAF. Military leaders at all levels were frequently preoccupied with internal problems and consequently had little time to study the enemy situation. Politics invaded the military and it was not the kind of beneficial, political consciousness that all patriotic soldiers should have, but the politics of survival of the particular regime in power at the time. The true mission of the armed forces, to defeat Communist aggression, was repeatedly neglected in favor of the unspoken concern to prevent an overthrow of the government.

Building political strength through motivating the people's participation in national defense, originated during the First Republic, was pursued as a national goal by every subsequent South Vietnamese administration. The concept of popular self-defense, aided by military and paramilitary forces, was aimed at establishing and maintaining security, which was the basic condition for realizing political, economic and social objectives. This concept, the implementation of which kept changing with new experiences and increased American support, emerged under various guises: Strategic Hamlets, New Life Hamlets, Pacification, and Rural Construction and Development. But the end always remained popular

participation in and support of the national policy to confront the Communists in the military, political, economic, and social areas; to confront the enemy in two fundamental aspects of the people's war waged in the South by the Communists: a popular war and a total war.

The people's self-defense capability was an essential complement to the military strategy which relied increasingly on firepower and movement, and the tactics designed to produce them. The people's self-defense capability was necessary to alleviate the shortage of military personnel and to establish the favorable strength ratio demanded by a counter-insurgency situation. This ratio had been determined by Emperor Napoleon as being ten-to-one; experience obtained in the wars in Greece and Malaysia confirmed a similar ratio. In Vietnam, however, the most favorable friendly-to-enemy ratio, which was achieved before American and Free World forces withdrew, was only five-to-one.

But even if we were unable to attract the population to our side in numbers sufficient to provide the theoretical ratio of forces we thought we needed, we still endeavored to separate the population from the enemy so that he could not exploit it for his own purposes. If this strategy succeeded, many of the people would support and defend the Republic, others would be passive but contribute no resources to the enemy, while the regular forces with United States support would eject the invading armies of the North.

CHAPTER II

Early Strategies

Pacification

Pacification was not a new concept for dealing with insurgency. Pacification strategies were applied by the French soon after 1963 when French forces undertook the conquest of Indochina. These strategies called for three phases:

Phase 1: Launch lightning attacks on the enemy's sanctuaries throughout the land in order to destroy his main force and to secure key areas.

Phase 2: Set up defensive positions in occupied territories and start local government functioning.

Phase 3: From controlled areas, launch military operations in order to expand pacified areas and activate civil guard units and village councils in order to strengthen control of rural areas.

During the First Indochina War of 1946-1954, the French put pacification strategies into effect again but applied them in varying degrees and permutations in North, Central, and South Vietnam. In the North, the French initially struck only in the highlands where key Viet Minh commands were located and, except for Son Tay Province, neglected pacification in the plains. Only in early 1948, after their attempts in the highlands had been defeated, did the French initiate their pacification effort in the Red River Delta. The provinces of Hung Yen and Thai Binh were the last occupied by French forces at the end of 1949 and the stiff reaction of the Viet Minh in the Delta eventually reversed the gains the French had made in two years.

The French pacification effort in the Red River Delta was hopelessly flawed; it could not attract the popular support that was essential for

success in this densely populated region simply because it was pure French and not Vietnamese. On the other hand, since the Viet Minh had determined that North Vietnam was their main battlefield, they considered it vital that they secure the support and resources of the Delta for the Viet Minh. Therefore, the Viet Minh were vigorous in opposing the French in the Delta and they were able to secure at least the passive support from the people they needed for success.

Finally in 1951, the Vietnamese Governor of North Vietnam persuaded the French to permit him to organize the first Vietnamese pacification effort. Four *Groupe Administratif Militaire Operationel (GAMO)* were formed to carry out the program. The groups had the mission of replacing the military units in newly liberated areas, maintaining law and order, and establishing local government at the grass-roots level. Each group was organized and directed by a prominent Vietnamese with political prestige among the populace; he was usually a member of the nationalist *Dai Viet* Party. Each group consisted of 60 members; there was an administrative team, a military team, a health and welfare team, and an information team. As soon as the group arrived in a newly occupied area, the administrative team began organizing civilian life and surveying the people's needs. The military team combed the area to weed out enemy agents and insure security. The health and welfare team distributed medicines and cared for the sick. The information team, in cooperation with other teams, conducted information sessions to educate the people on the policies of the nationalist government.

The GAMOs achieved respectable success in that they were able to gain the people's sympathy through the Vietnamese nationalist character of their operations. However, with only four GAMOs for the entire North, their operations were limited and the high level of fighting and an ever-worsening military and security situation severely curtailed their activities.

In South Vietnam, pacification was systematically carried out. The plan was based on the old three-stage French program with a few modifications: the initial stage called for repelling the enemy regular forces and destroying their base areas. The second stage consisted of defending

territorial gains by setting up military posts along new security belts. The third stage was a period of consolidation, restoring normal life by establishing rural administrative units and organizing the hamlet militia to maintain security of occupied areas.

In 1947 the French assigned to a Vietnamese-French officer, Colonel LeRoy, the task of pacifying the Mekong Delta provinces of My Tho and Ben Tre. He was successful in repelling and controlling the Viet Minh military units but failed to gain genuine popular support because of his cruelties and excesses. Pacification was conceived by him as follows:

> "Pacification is a combination of cruel action and overt and covert political action. On the one hand, it involves commando pursuits and keeping close tabs on the guerrillas; the deployment of an extensive network of informers and the severe repression of villagers or persons who harbor and supply Viet Minh elements. On the other hand, it involves building roads, holding markets, opening schools, erecting dispensaries, helping the people to farm new land, etc."[1]

In 1952, the French began to turn over military control of the territory to the Vietnamese Armed Forces with the expectation that Vietnamese territorial commands would be able to carry out pacification more effectively than French forces. Pacification measures applied included: (1) making a careful and thorough census and screening the population living in controlled areas; (2) bringing paramilitary forces up to strength to enable them to perform security duty in the villages; (3) turning over to these forces a number of minor military posts, thus alleviating the burden on regular forces; and (4) consolidating strike forces and assigning them to mobile duty.

Each sector (the sector was the military division conterminous with the province) was authorized a strike force of 300 men. Some sectors were joined for military operations into sector groups and in that case a strike force of 400 men was authorized. In some regions where the Viet Cong threat was serious enough, military zones were designated and these zones had strike forces authorized 800 men.

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[1] The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam in the Formative Years, 1946-1955 published by J-5, Joint General Staff RVNAF, 1972, p. 62.

A system of defenses was organized to pacify each province. For example, Go Cong and Ben Tre Provinces in the Delta had a system composed of 1,500 individual sites, such as outposts and watchtowers. The force manning these positions and furnishing the strike forces was 14,800 men, including 1,300 regulars, 6,000 auxiliaries, and 7,500 rural militia.

Le Duan, Chairman of the Viet Cong Administrative Committee for the South, wrote about this situation as follows:

> "While the enemy is active, we are passive because he has divided and surrounded us with an intricate system of fortifications and watchtowers along arteries of communication and deep into rural areas."[2]

Although pacification plans were in effect throughout Vietnam during the war years 1946-1954, success was achieved only in South Vietnam where the influence of the French and the Vietnamese government was greatest among the population and where the enemy forces were weakest. By contrast, pacification failed utterly in North and Central Vietnam because it was not pursued vigorously and was not anchored on a political base capable of attracting the people's allegiance.

Finally, in 1953, the French transfered two northern provinces — Hung Yen and Bui Chu — to Vietnamese command for the purposes of pacification. Vietnamese light infantry battalions were activated for the effort and other Vietnamese battalions were formed into mobile groups to confront the Viet Minh regular formations. But this belated Vietnamization effort did not succeed militarily or politically. The enemy had grown too strong and the battle-tested Viet Minh regiments were too powerful for the weaker mobile groups to confront. And the crucial political ideal of nationalism in its amorphous state failed to galvanize the populace.

It was not until after the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954 that a new political consciousness was crystalized in the South with the establishment of the First Republic, and this political entity took its rightful place in the pacification planning and execution in South Vietnam.

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[2] People of the South, June 1952. (A clandestine Communist monthly published in South Vietnam)

Strategy Under the First Republic of South Vietnam

The central characteristic of the South Vietnamese strategy was that it was defensive. This reflected the status of the South, born under difficult political circumstances after the 1954 Geneva Accords and whose national goal was nothing more than to build a free democracy with genuine sovereignty and protection from the aggressive designs of the Communists from the North. From a military point of view, North Vietnam, having trained, grown, and tested its forces and military commanders up to divisional level in the battles of the war of 1946-1954, had clear military superiority over the South.

The military threat from the North was envisaged by President Ngo Dinh Diem as appearing in two forms. The first was the threat of subversion created in the South by Communist military forces and Communist party members who stayed behind instead of going North as stipulated in the 1954 Geneva Accords. The second was the threat of invasion by regular North Vietnamese troops. To face this dual threat, the South's military strategy was designed to protect the territory against an invasion across its borders and to counter subversive activities within. The two key elements of the strategy called for (1) reorganizing the army to protect the frontiers and (2) gaining the support of the people through the Strategic Hamlets program. The task of defending national territory devolved mainly on the regular forces, aided by paramilitary forces. The regular forces were responsible for defending the borders against invasion and served as the general reserve; the paramilitary forces provided area defense, maintained law and order, and carried out pacification and anti-subversive operations.

After the 1954 Geneva Accords were signed the South Vietnamese Army had 205,000 men including 167,000 regulars and 38,000 in the auxiliary forces. The force was organized into 82 infantry battalions, 81 light infantry battalions, 5 airborne battalions, 6 Imperial Guard battalions, 9 artillery battalions, 4 engineer battalions, 6 transportation battalions, and 10 armored reconnaissance companies. Air support consisted of only one liaison flight and two combat support observation companies.

President Diem's military organization plan called for a force built around nine infantry divisions and one airborne division. This plan was submitted to the MAAG for discussion and funding. The MAAG would not approve the airborne division and would provide funding, from July 1955 on, for only four standard infantry divisions and six light divisions. Therefore, although President Diem would have the ten divisions he asked for, the force would lack the offensive capability found in an airborne division and it would also be less capable of sustained defense in conventional combat.

It was apparent that the Americans felt that four infantry divisions — called "field" divisions to distinguish them from the light divisions — would be sufficient to defend the frontiers against overt invasion. These field divisions were organized at a strength of 8,600 which was considerably smaller than a U.S. infantry division, but they contained their own administrative, logistic and combat support units, including one battalion of 105-mm howitzers, and were considered capable of independent, sustained combat.

The light divisions were organized for a different primary mission: that of operating against enemy insurgents in isolated, difficult terrain, employing, when appropriate, guerrilla tactics and techniques. They were to capitalize on their mobility in attacking enemy base areas and sanctuaries. They lacked the logistic and fire support of the field divisions and thus could deploy more rapidly. Their authorized strength was only 5,245 and their heaviest organic fire support were 81-mm mortars.

With this ten-division force as the core of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) other combat and combat support elements included an airborne brigade, four armored cavalry squadrons, and eleven separate light artillery battalions.

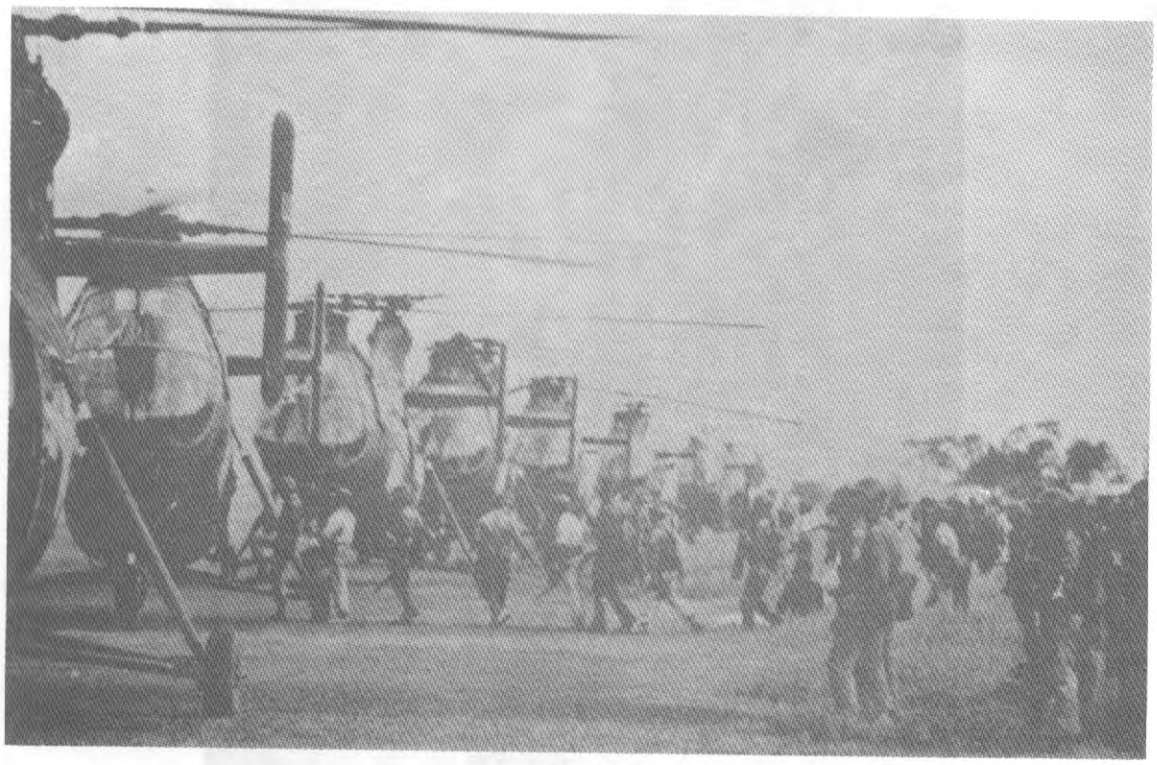
In 1955, two of the four field divisions were deployed to defend the northern frontier against an invasion across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). One was located in the Central Highlands to reinforce the defense of the invasion route at the tri-border. The fourth field division was positioned near Saigon as general reserve and to block the potential invasion route at the Tay Ninh Province border.

One of the six light divisions was stationed in the north to reinforce the two field divisions there. One was also in the Central Highlands in Kontum Province to help secure the tri-border area. Two other light divisions were deployed from the central coast along the major highways to the highlands. The remaining two divisions were in the Mekong Delta to protect the large population centers found there.

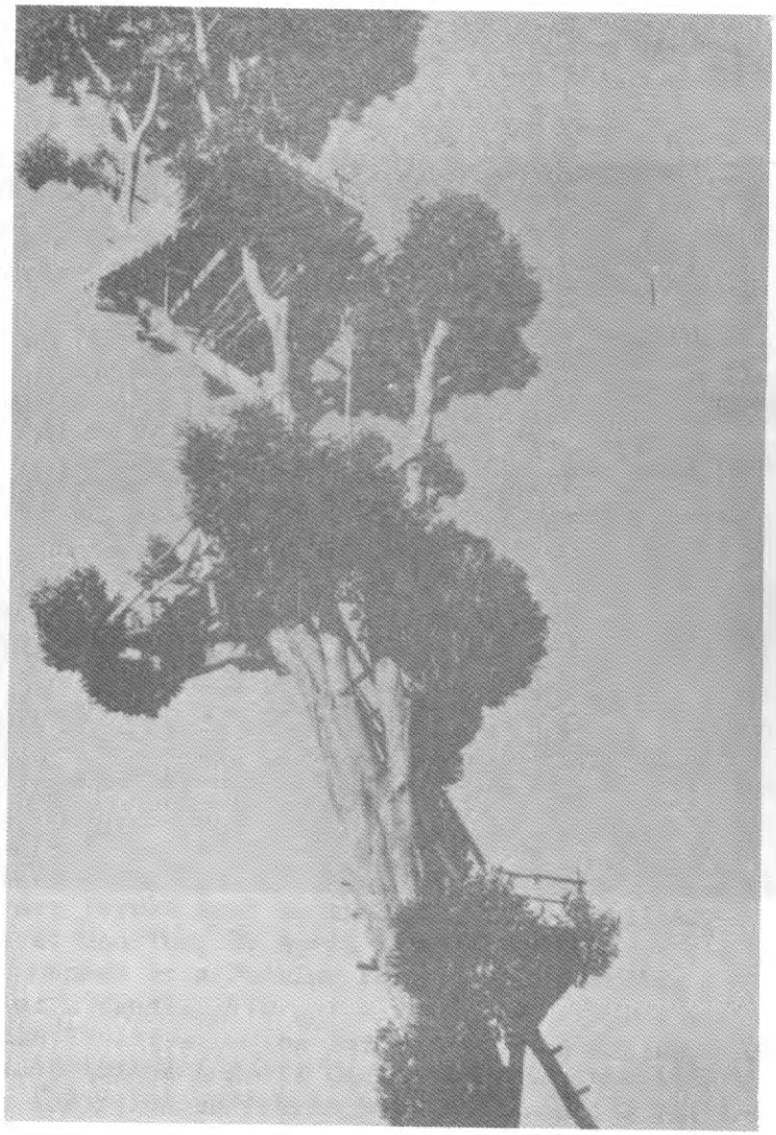
At the end of 1958 the Americans promoted the concept that the light divisions should be converted into field divisions. When this was done there were no longer units designed and equipped for quick forays into enemy sanctuaries and remote bases. Seeing this void President Diem authorized the formation of ranger units to take over this mission. Accordingly, in late 1962, every fourth company of every infantry battalion became the ranger company. There were 65 such companies and most of them received their special training in actual combat rather than in any training center. Officers and non-commissioned officers with extensive combat experience were encouraged to transfer to ranger companies. Later, when the enemy began to operate in battalions, the rangers — now with U.S. encouragement and support — were organized into twenty battalions, placed under the command of the military region commanders, and employed throughout the military regions rather than within the sectors as before.

Territorial forces, separate from the National Army, existed in Vietnam since 1948. By 1955 there were 13 territorial regiments throughout the country. Until the end of the war in 1954 they were known by different names depending on the governor they belonged to: North, Central or South Vietnam (Cochin). For example, in North Vietnam they were known as *Bao Chinh Doan*, which was an abbreviated way of saying "forces that defend the administration and the just nationalist cause." Because the *Bao Chinh Doan* were closely associated with the nationalist *Dai Viet* political party they were considered by the French to be the military forces of the *Dai Viets*. Since the *Dai Viets* had opposed the French in 1940, the French would have no part in supporting the *Bao Chinh Doan*.

In Central Vietnam the situation was quite different. The French supported Bao Dai and therefore the territorial force organized by Bao Dai loyalist Phan Van Giao in 1948. This force was called *Viet Binh Doan*



Vietnamese Rangers Boarding U.S. Army H-21 Helicopters
in an Operation Against Viet Cong Bases in the Plain of Reeds in 1962



Ranger Observation Post Near Trung Lap, May 1962

which simply meant Vietnamese Military Group. But the initials — VBD — were widely interpreted to mean "*Vi Bao Dai*" and "*Voi Bao Dai*;" in English, "for and with Bao Dai."

In the South the French supported the *Ve Binh Quoc Gia* — National Guard — and entrusted it with administrative functions as well as military security operations.

In April 1955, the territorial forces of Central and South Vietnam were unified under the title of Civil Guard (CG). The Civil Guard (CG) came under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry. Organized into squads, platoons, companies, and battalions, it was assigned the dual mission of maintaining law and order and participating in civic action programs. In practice the Ministry of Interior had only administrative control of the Civil Guard; the units were actually commanded by the Province Chiefs. While the CG operated at the provincial level, at the village level security was the responsibility of the Self-Defense units whose members were recruited from among villagers. They were equipped with rudimentary arms and had no uniforms.

As a consequence of the 1954 Geneva Accords, peace was restored and American policy provided that U.S. military assistance would support a South Vietnamese army of only 150,000 men. This remained the constant strength from June 1955 to August 1961. The Americans permitted it to increase only when the military threat from the North became all too obvious. Though constrained within the strength limit of 150,000 men, the First Republic's military planning demonstrated the South's concern about the military threat from the North, and provided for counter-measures as they were required by the situation.

First of all, new types of units were activated to bolster the defense of border and coastal areas and to achieve mobility and offset the weaknesses of an area type of defense. The first of these were the Vietnamese Special Forces, created in 1957 and patterned after the organization and modes of operation of the U.S. Army Special Forces. The soldiers in the special forces units were recruited from the ethnic groups and tribes in the highlands and swamps where the units operated. Not only were these soldiers familiar with the terrain and weather and therefore able to endure

the hardships of life in the rugged frontier areas of South Vietnam, but employment of the highland tribes in particular countered the efforts of the Viet Cong who attempted to incite the tribal groups against the government and exploit the long-standing animosities between the tribes and the government.

Built along the Lao and Cambodian borders, special forces camps blocked avenues of approach leading into the First and Second Military Regions. Camps were also set up in unpopulated back country from which border patrols, trail surveillance, raids, and reconnaissance missions could be staged.

Maritime patrol units were activated in 1960 to reduce the amount of supplies and infiltrators being sent by sea from the North into the coasts of South Vietnam. Fishermen who were familiar with local shipping and fishing patterns and who knew the coastline and hiding places were recruited for these patrols. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Navy patrolled farther out at sea and the Regional Forces (RF) and police maintained surveillance in the coastal villages. This three-sided operation—deep sea, coastal waters and ashore—was established from the 17th parallel in the north, around Cape Ca Mau, and to the Cambodian border at Ha Tien. The boats the coastal units used were of the type used by fishermen in the particular region. For example, in Quang Tri and Thua Thien they used the local woven-hulled sailing craft. Later an improved motorized junk was developed and built in the Vietnamese Navy shipyards. This craft, the Yabuta junk, was faster and more seaworthy than the traditional fishing boats and it was deployed throughout the system. By the end of 1961, the Vietnamese Navy was operating eight patrol boat groups, each with 20 boats.

Improving Communications and Control

When North Vietnam made plans to conquer the South in 1958, one of its major considerations was the introduction of men and weapons. Securing a safe infiltration route for this purpose was therefore a primordial task to be achieved above everything else. During the survey process, Hanoi's agents reconnoitered all access roads along the Laotian panhandle's

eastern area and the western border strip of upper South Vietnam. The major task of putting this infiltration road system together and testing its practicability was eventually assigned to a team led by an elderly southern-born cadre who had reputed knowledge of local road communications. This man made a long journey in the reverse direction, departing from South Vietnam and consulting as he progressed north with local Viet Minh agents to select the best practicable route. In time, this famous infiltration route became known to the West as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, an old name dating from the days of the First Indochina War. Many Communist cadres, however, called it "The Old Man Trail" as a special tribute to the man who had pioneered it.

While North Vietnam surveyed and prepared this infiltration route, President Ngo Dinh Diem also decided to improve South Vietnam's road system. His concern was primarily strategic. In his thinking, the road network would have to be expanded to permit the rapid deployment of fighting units to strike enemy bases, to defend threatened areas, and to support ARVN units occupying remote outposts. Consequently, in 1958 he inaugurated the strategic highway improvement plan. In Military Region 1, work was started on a link between Highway 1 and Nam Dong via Bach Ma Pass and between Nam Dong and the A Shau Valley. This would make it possible to resupply the outposts in the A Shau Valley by vehicle rather than only by air. National Highway 9 was repaired to link Dong Ha to Khe Sanh and Lao Bao, the gateway to the Lao border.

In Military Region 2, National Highway 19 was repaired and enlarged at the An Khe and Mang Yang Passes to allow for better access to the highlands of Pleiku from the coastal lowlands of Binh Dinh. National Highway 14 was reconnoitered north of Kontum for the feasibility of linkage between Military Region 2 and the seaport of Danang. Sections of the countryside from Ban Me Thuot to Dalat and from Di Linh to Phan Thiet were surveyed for road construction also.

In Military Region 3, the strategic Saigon-Bien Hoa highway was built, slicing through the VC An Phu Dong base area and providing rapid access to MR-3 headquarters and on QL-15 to Vung Tau.

Waterways were an integral part of the plan. In Military Region 4, the Dong Tien Canal was cut across the VC Dong Thap Muoi (Plain of Reeds) secret zone to link with the waterway systems of Military Regions 3 and 4.

A study of the provincial organization and boundaries revealed that anti-guerrilla operations were rarely undertaken in the border areas between provinces and coordination between adjacent provinces was poor. The Viet Cong recognized this weakness and exploited it by locating their bases and liaison routes in the boundary regions. President Diem decided to rectify this situation by creating new provinces and boundaries that would centralize the responsibility in the hands of a single province chief for operations against some of the most important Viet Cong installations.

In Military Region 1, Quang Tin Province was created out of parts of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai in order to provide for better operations against the VC Bong Hong secret zone.

Phu Bon Province in Military Region 2 was carved out of four provinces: Pleiku, Binh Dinh, Ban Me Thuot, and Phu Yen. Highway 7B ran through Phu Bon Province and provided one more link between the highlands (Highway 14) and the coast (Highway 1). By creating Phu Bon the responsibility for security of this route was centralized.

The vast forested region along the Cambodian border with Ban Me Thuot and Binh Long Province could not be adequately covered from the capitals of these two provinces. Infiltration of Communists across the border from Cambodia was occurring unchecked. To deal with this problem two new provinces, Quang Duc and Phuoc Long, were created.

North of Saigon in Military Region 3, where the provinces of Binh Duong, Bien Hoa and Long Khanh met, President Diem created the new province of Phuoc Thanh. This was done to facilitate better control over operations against the VC liaison routes between War Zones C and D that passed through this area, and better coordinate operations in the VC secret zones west of National Route 13, the Boi Loi woods, Ho Bo woods, and the Long Nguyen secret zone. (This was the only province created by President Diem that did not survive

his demise; it was eliminated when the new government determined that it was unnecessary.)

Another new province was created in Military Region 3: Hau Nghia. This province was constructed from parts of Tay Ninh, Binh Duong and Long An in order to provide better security along the Cambodian border west of Saigon in the region of the Parrot's Beak and Ba Thu.

Moc Hoa District of Long An Province became a province in Military Region 4, Kien Tuong. It was created to provide better control of Communist infiltration from Svay Rieng Province of Cambodia in the area of the Elephant's Foot. Two other new provinces established in Military Region 4 were Kien Phong and Sa Dec. Together with Kien Tuong, these new provinces provided better coordination for operations against the VC's famous Dong Thap Muoi secret zone which they boasted was impregnable.

Finally, the rich rice-growing region of the lower Mekong Delta between the provinces of Kien Giang, An Xuyen, Can Tho and Ba Xuyen, where VC activities were very hard to control, became Chuong Thien Province.

This entire territorial reorganization resulted in positioning provincial centers in key areas where there was intense enemy activity. The results were greater government control of all resources, better defined areas of responsibility, more economical distribution of forces, and greater opportunities for commanders to conduct better surveillance of and operations against the enemy.

Strategic Hamlets

In conjunction with the concepts of the strategic highway network and territorial reorganization, a social problem with important economic and military aspects cried out for attention. South Vietnam had over 800,000 refugees who had moved south after the 1954 treaty and thousands of other destitute people from poverty-stricken Central Vietnam. All these people would have to be resettled and provided opportunities to become self-supporting. Influenced more by military than by humanitarian, political or economic considerations, the resettlement program,

which located the people in areas of military significance such as along strategic highways and in defensive belts around cities, revealed that the leaders of the First Republic recognized that the population was a strategic resource in itself that could be used in the national defense effort, a concept which they developed until it became a national stretegy: the strategy of the Strategic Hamlets.

In seventeenth and eighteenth century Vietnam, the southward movement of the Vietnamese people followed a settlement pattern consisting of agricultural settlements and plantations. As time passed, these settled areas became autonomous administratively and politically and evolved customs and practices which took precedence over national law. This situation was reflected in the ancient popular saying: "The king's law yields to the village's rules." The concept of autonomous zones was seen at work in the Phat Diem diocese, Kim Son District, Ninh Binh Province in North Vietnam. When asked in 1941 to be advisor to the Ho Chi Minh government, Bishop Le Huu Tu, then in charge of the diocese, asked that the Phat Diem area be made autonomous and placed under his own governance. His request was granted by the Ho Chi Minh administration and the area surrounding the Phat Diem seminary was declared self-governing and off-limits to communist activities. The Phat Diem congregation gradually expanded their dominion over the entire district of Kim Son. This experience was repeated in 1950 when the Bui Chu diocese of Nam Dinh Province in North Vietnam became the second such district to gain self-government.

In order to meet the military threat from the Viet Minh, Catholic leaders organized defensive units called Popular Force Regiments. These units were nowhere near regimental size, but consisted of the youths of the villages being defended. The volunteers were grouped into platoons and armed with rudimentary weapons such as machetes and spears. Villages were fortified and accesses, except for carefully guarded main gates, were entirely sealed off. Notwithstanding their primitive armaments and cursory military training, villages in these autonomous zones were able to repel Viet Minh attacks, thanks to high esprit and the network of defenses which included trenches, mines and booby traps.

President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu (especially the latter) were not only devout Catholics but scholars of history and political science. The historical pattern of early agricultural settlements and the evolution of the autonomous zones of Bui Chu and Phat Diem greatly influenced the strategic thinking of these leaders of the First Republic. The idea of agricultural development was put into effect in several places such as the Lao Bao Agricultural Settlement in Quang Tri Province at the gateway to the Lao border on National Highway 9; the Nam Dong Settlement south of the city of Hue; the Hau Nghia Settlement adjacent to the Cambodian border near the Parrot's Beak and Ba Thu; the Tri Phap Settlement in the Dong Thap Muoi (Plain of Reeds) area, a famous Viet Minh sanctuary from 1945 to 1954. The locations of these settlements were dictated more by military considerations than by economic ones. This bias was redressed in July 1959 when the agricultural development program gave way to the Agroville program. Agrovilles were conceived with two objectives in mind: first, to create conditions favorable to economic and social development in rural areas; and second, to contribute to the maintenance of local security.

As a rule, agrovilles were built in areas formerly controlled by the enemy and along main arteries of communication in order to form secure corridors for the flow of traffic and commerce and for rescue missions to arrive from other areas. As incentives to encourage people to settle in agrovilles and to facilitate economic and social development, electricity and water, health and educational facilities and marketplaces were provided by the government. The expenses were paid partly out of the national budget and partly out of local taxes. A total of 23 agrovilles were built in 11 provinces, involving 32,000 people and 6,000 hectares of land strung along highways connecting cities such as Saigon, Dalat, Hue, and Danang.

The agroville program was flawed in that it created a completely new basic administrative unit. The people, raised in and accustomed to the hamlet as the basic social and administrative unit, had difficulty identifying with the agroville. Further, because each

agroville assembled a large population of three to four thousand in a comparatively large area, defense and internal control became extremely difficult and were thus neglected.

With the demise of the agroville program in 1961, another idea went through a test in various localities and was finally proclaimed as a national policy in March 1962: the Strategic Hamlets. Hamlets were called strategic because they were the basic administrative units of the country and the very foundation of the program. They were to be built on a plan whose objective was to make changes in four areas: defense, politics, economics and social.

It was Counselor Nhu's theory that the villages of South Vietnam could be defended against VC armed forays if the hamlets were properly defended. It followed that if the defenses were properly designed and executed, all populated regions of the country would be secure. His concept for hamlet security was therefore crucial to the strategy. Although the concept was simple in design, it was difficult to execute, for it meant that a vast network of small but mutually supporting defensive positions would have to be constructed and manned throughout the populated countryside. This network, in theory, would provide for detection of all enemy movement in the zone and for effective mutual defense among the several hamlets of the villages. It would nullify the enemy's people's war strategy in this war that had no front line.

With regard to politics, each hamlet would institute democratic processes such as electing village councils and drafting the village charter and ordinances.

Economically, greater productivity would be achieved through planting new seeds. Guidance in new farming and animal husbandry techniques were provided by the government's agricultural experts.

For years the laws and rules that governed all aspects of life in the rural communities had been created by the village councils. Because membership on the village councils was the exclusive prerogative of wealthy land-owners, the laws and rules favored these men to the absolute exclusion of the peasants. Extreme abuses and cruelties were the result; physical punishment, for example, was not

uncommonly administered for such an offense as non-payment of debt. Exhorbitant interest was charged on loans and the peasant's share of the rice crop was very small. The social structure of the Strategic Hamlets would change all this because the people would elect their own councils from among all villagers. The monopoly of the wealthy landlord would be broken.

Therefore, although the Strategic Hamlet program primarily sought military security it also sought to achieve political, economic, and social reforms. it was based on the premise that only when the masses begin to be concerned about their economic rights, their property rights, their political rights, their social privileges and the conveniences they are enjoying, will they wholeheartedly safeguard what they have and what they hold dear. In other words, the Strategic Hamlet plan strove to motivate the people to defend themselves and their families and to contribute to the defense of the community at large.

President Diem and Counselor Nhu exploited their understanding of the people's spirit and awareness of their public responsibilities to promote the Strategic Hamlets. In order to succeed, the people had to accept the idea of self-reliance in private as well as social life; of non-reliance on outside assistance. For example, the government initially loaned weapons to the people, usually 30 to each hamlet. Six months later each hamlet was to procure its own arsenal by capturing enemy weapons; the government would provide only ammunition. Hamlet defense barriers made use of locally available materials such as bamboo and thorn plants such as cacti and pineapple.

The Strategic Hamlet program created quite a sensation in the country. Intent on pushing the program to completion, the government required all civil servants, ranking civilian officials and military leaders to study the program. Local authorities, expected to prove to the central government their accomplishments in the program, spared no means to score high and in doing so alienated the people. For example, villages usually sprawl along waterways in the lowlands or along highways and pathways in the highlands. Attempts to gather the people into a centralized location was tantamount to placing them in a concentration camp of sorts. This forced relocation aggravated

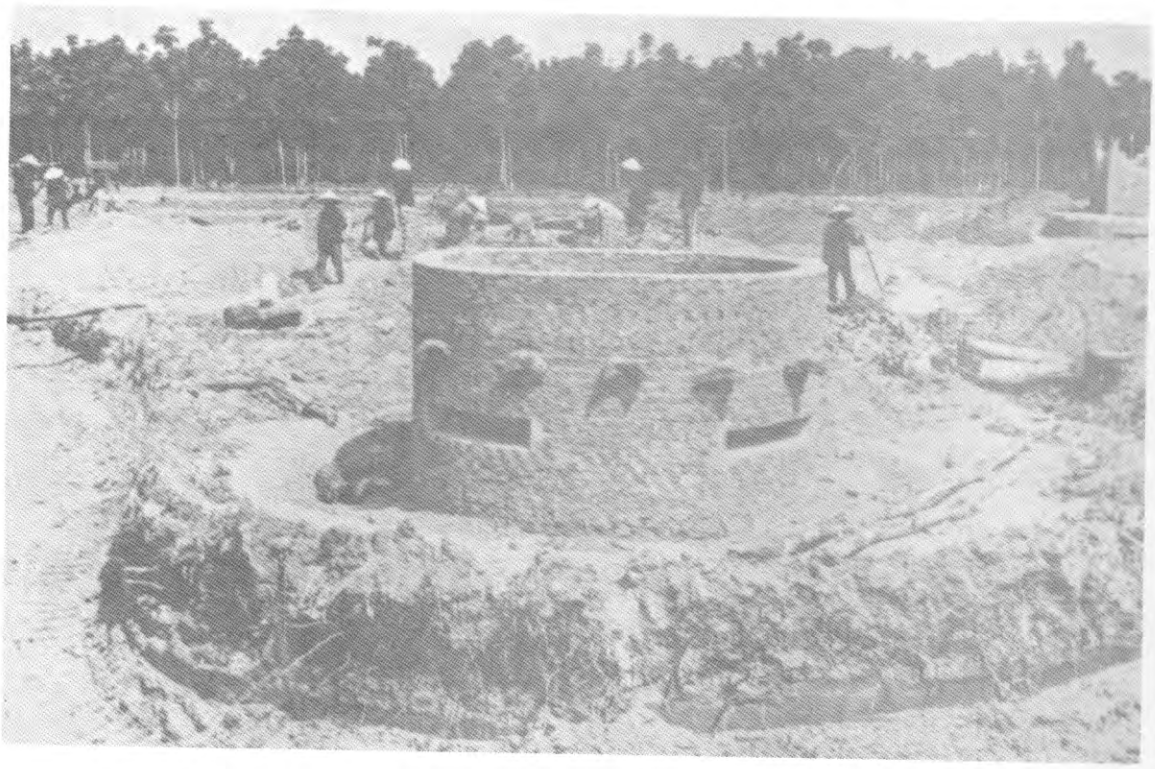
the people's discontent and grievances. Even before any tangible benefits had accrued, extensive material and morale damage was done. Villagers were forced to leave their homesteads for resettlement on new land and although they received some cash and building materials, these proved inadequate for erecting even temporary houses. The forced abandonment of old homes with their sacrosanct memories, gardens, lands, and ancestral graves were irreplaceable losses.

Forcible methods ran counter to the idea of voluntary participation of the Strategic Hamlet policy. President Diem was correct when he referred to the state of mind of the people as being vital to pacification, but he failed to understand that state of mind. The obligatory and excessive contributions of labor for such works as digging trenches and moats, and of cash to meet the operational costs of the hamlets, all exacted from villagers, were reminiscent of the forced labor and taxation system of French rule. These popular grievances added grist to the mill of opposition parties who protested against the policies of the authorities. The Communists exploited the feeling against the Strategic Hamlets not only by attacking them militarily but by waging a virulent propaganda campaign against them, demanding their elimination.

This violent opposition, however, was also an indication of the difficulty the Strategic Hamlet program had caused the VC. To a certain extent the strategy succeeded in separating the Communists from the masses and in denying them sources of food as well as other human, material, and financial resources. More important was the regrouping of the populace to the Nationalist side, its organization into people's groups, and its cooperation with the Nationalist government, which, though initially obtained through coercion, gradually became habitual.

The Revolution of 1 November 1963 toppled the First Republic. Immediately after the coup, Lieutenant General Ton That Dinh, the Minister of Interior for the new government, declared to newsmen that the Strategic Hamlet program of the House of Ngo had to be abolished. This statement was later denied by other members of the Revolutionary Committee, but a large number of Strategic Hamlets were dismantled by the Communists who took advantage of the troubled situation. Nevertheless, the Strategic Hamlet program was regarded by all subsequent governments as having

strategic value, and with certain improvements and American aid, the South still considered pacification and rural development as the basis of a grand national strategy.



Watchtower Under Construction in a Strategic Hamlet, 1962

Women of the Civil Guard at Hoa Cam.
To the Rear, a Company of Men of the Civil Guard,
in the Summer of 1962

Women in the Local Militia in Military Drill, 1962

CHAPTER III

Strategy During the Period of U.S. Participation

The demise of the First Republic was followed by a period of political instability. This political instability eroded military security because high-ranking military leaders were more preoccupied with internal fighting. Communist strength grew apace and there were indications that the Third Strategic Stage, a general offensive, was imminent.

Indeed, in their estimate, Hanoi's leaders believed at this juncture that their military gains during 1964, coupled with an unprecedented political opportunity, were paving the way for ultimate success. But to wage a general offensive, their military forces in South Vietnam naturally needed to be augmented. As the first step, therefore, Hanoi deployed the 325th NVA Division to the Central Highlands with the determination to hold it. Pleiku and Kontum, the two major communication hubs of this area had always been our enemy's traditional objectives.

The strategic value of the Central Highlands, to our enemy, was clearly one of military geography. This important area lay adjacent to the last leg of the Laotian infiltration route which led into a bridgehead zone called the "Tri-Border" area. Joined with the Boloven Plateau further south, it offered an excellent platform from which avenues of approach could be carved into Cambodia and South Vietnam's MR-2 and MR-3. From the highland city of Pleiku toward the Binh Dinh coastal area, severing South Vietnam into two isolated halves along Route QL-19 would not be much of a difficulty, militarily speaking, provided that enough forces were available. The terrain of the Central Highlands also lent itself to enemy military activities because it provided concealment for troop movements, reduced the effect of air and artillery

firepower and curtailed the use of armor by friendly forces.

The injection of U.S. military forces managed to relieve Communist pressure and save the South from immediate danger. During the first phase of American intervention, from 1965 to 1969, the American forces assumed the responsibility of destroying the enemy's main force, base areas and supply lines, defending border areas and the area below the demarcation line to interdict enemy infiltration from the North. The RVNAF responsibility was to commit its main effort to pacification and the development of populated areas. The coordinated action of the two armed forces, to destroy the enemy main force by military operations and to pacify the territory, caused the North Vietnamese to alter their strategy and attack the cities of the South in the offensive of 1968. Though a military defeat for the North this offensive scored a political victory, in that American political leaders became convinced that there would be no military victory for South Vietnam and that the war would drag on for years. This was the genesis of a new program of Vietnamization to expand and modernize the RVNAF and gradually to turn over all operational responsibilities to the Vietnamese as U.S. forces withdrew.

The South's strategy during the period of participation by American forces in the Vietnam war, from March 1965 to 27 January 1973, could be encapsulated in three main tasks: (1) continue the effort of pacification and rural development; (2) dismantle the enemy infrastructure through *Operation Phoenix;* and (3) expand and modernize the armed forces in accordance with *Vietnamization.*

Pacification and Rural Development

The Strategic Hamlet program of the First Republic, though severely criticized, was regarded by succeeding leaders of the South as the basic strategy to counter the North's plan to take over South Vietnam. Modifications in the techniques of execution were required, however, to correct weaknesses and to profit by the experiences of the First Republic. The Plan for Victory (*Chien Thang*) made official in March 1964, required some modifications, the first of which was renaming Strategic Hamlets; they became New Life hamlets.

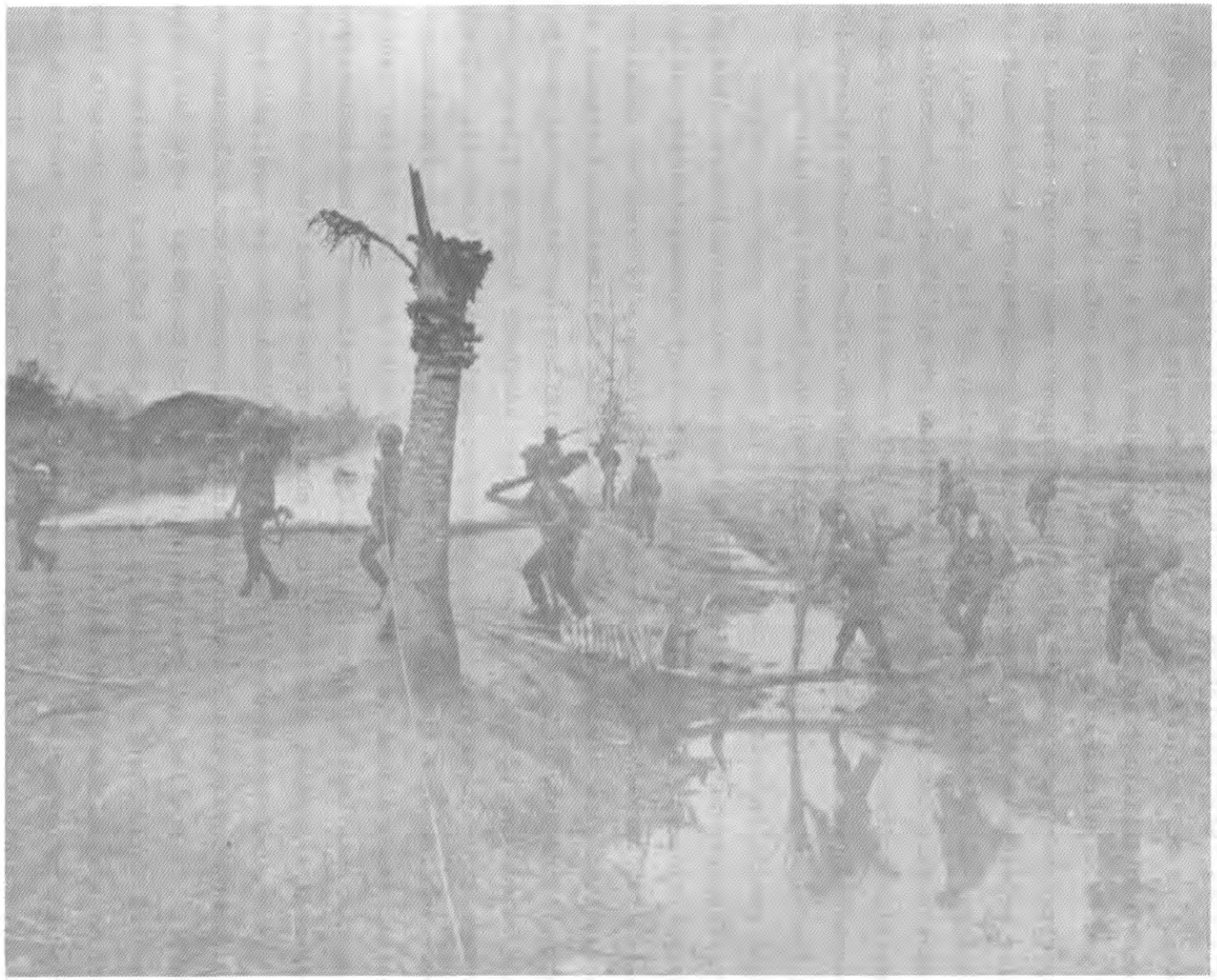
The Victory Plan was based on the oil slick principle, implementing pacification first in heavily populated and prosperous areas, and gradually spreading to less populated and less prosperous ones. Capitalizing on the criticims of the Strategic Hamlet program, the Victory Plan introduced a number of other modifications such as reducing excessive resettlements, compensating the people for damages incurred by resettlement, avoiding unnecessary planting of mines and booby traps, avoiding press-ganging the people into projects that were the government's responsibility such as road building and ditch digging.

The Victory Plan still exhibited serious weaknesses, however. There was a lack of coordination between the civilian and military agencies. Secondly, funds earmarked for resettlement damage compensation and construction of public utilities were inadequate. Thirdly, there was a shortage of qualified government officials at the local level to supervise the program.

In the beginning, the RVNAF were not yet organized or equipped to provide the support the New Life Hamlet program needed. A typical example of their limitation was their response to rescue and defense mission requests from New Life hamlets. The hamlet defense forces had the capability to discover impending enemy attacks and to offer brief resistance after the attacks began. They needed help from the ARVN to survive determined enemy attacks. The best night support available for them was artillery firepower, and yet there was no direct communication link between hamlets under attack and artillery units.

Until the mission of the RVNAF was clearly defined as being primarily pacification, RVNAF had to split its resources between military operations and pacification support. In 1965 this mission was defined as pacification support but it was not until 1966 that the RVNAF was really ready to assume the mission. Units had to be trained in the pacification effort, in civic action and in techniques to gain the support of the people.

The size and category of the armed forces to be employed in a particular pacification mission depended on the status of security in each locality. Four classifications of security were defined to provide the basis for this judgement. An area was considered secure where local



Regular ARVN Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 33d Infantry, 21st Division
During an Operation in the Mekong Delta, An Xuyen Province, 1967

volutionary development project had been achieved; and at the same time, protecting developed areas against relapsing into enemy control.

From 1969 on, as the RVNAF gradually regained operational responsibilities, Regional Forces and Popular Forces replaced regular infantry battalions and infantry divisions would reinforce RF and PF only on order from division tactical zone commanders and in vital areas which RF and PF were incapable of handling. Thus the principal forces that supported the pacification effort were Regional and Popular Forces. RF units provided mobile defense in the areas lying between hamlets and villages, along enemy routes of communication and set up a distant security belt for PF units. The main objective of RF were VC provincial guerrilla units. PF units served in their own village or hamlet, protected the people, the resources and fixed installations. PF operated in the hamlets and not far away from them; their main targets were local guerrilla units.

Compared with the pacification effort of the years 1962 to 1967, the pacification and rural development effort of the years after 1967 registered marked improvements on several fronts. In terms of commitment, greater determination was evident in the utilization of regular forces, thus avoiding the criticism that military operations had no connection with pacification. There were adequate funds to finance government projects aimed at achieving economic and social goals. The government created the Ministry of Rural Development to coordinate operations of all ministries having rural projects while the American side set up a unified agency called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) to take charge of pacification.

An annual combined military plan called Plan AB was developed by the Joint General Staff and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). It spelled out missions and tasks for the RVNAF and U.S. forces and Free World Forces in support of pacification and rural development. Serious weaknesses appeared in the plan, however. One was the selection of priority objectives within areas under pacification. Priority objectives were assigned at the provincial level. Priorities were dictated by the security situation, the need for support, the progress of programs, local capabilities, and so on. Though reasonable in principle

this resulted in 44 priority target areas in as many provinces, and no overall priority areas on the national or military region level. The organizational principle of national planning which calls for priorities to be established at the highest level, priorities that correlate to the national strategy, had been reversed. The result was that no two plans for adjacent provinces were mutually compatible and provincial border areas were ignored. The Communists, capitalizing on the neglect, set up their base areas in these border regions. Each province and district chief looked to the neighboring jurisdiction to handle the problem but few did.

Another weakness lay in the fact that local authorities frequently selected priority target areas that would lend themselves to easy success so that favorable reports might later be filed with the Central Development Council and favorable evaluations would be made by inspectors.

Another weakness resided in the fact that infantry battalions and regiments were assigned to sector commands in support of the pacification and rural development effort. This meant that division commanders were unable to control their units and divisional staffs had few opportunities to plan operations at the divisional level. Moreover, battalions and regiments assigned to local military authorities were further split into company-size units so that ultimately it was only at the company level that action was actually performed and experience gained. A serious command and control problem was the result. Although the division commander relinquished control of battalions to sector commanders, the sector commanders actually assumed little control. The battalions still reported to and received orders from their regiments and all activities and operations by the battalions in support of pacification depended on cooperation and such good will that the sector commander could achieve with the battalion commander.

Generally speaking, the commitment of divisional units to the support of rural development, though it increased the capabilities and resources available for the effort, resulted in a decrease in the fighting competence and ability of the units. Furthermore, as time went by, these units slowly acquired the complacency of stationary forces more accustomed to area defense than to offensive operations. It was easier to introduce

an infantry unit into an area than to remove it. The people, accustomed to the presence of regular units, felt their confidence shaken when these units were withdrawn because they lacked faith in the RF and PF. Morale among the RF and PF also suffered when regular units departed. They knew that their security had been diminished and that the VC were likely to exploit this weakness.

But the most important weakness in the pacification strategy was, up to this point, not even recognized. This was the fact that no concerted action was being taken to destroy the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), that complex, widespread apparatus that provided essential support to the military arm of the Viet Cong and directed the entire insurgency effort.

It was true that the government of the First Republic had correctly regarded the VCI as a dangerous force to contend with. As early as 1958, therefore, efforts to eliminate it were carried out in secret under orders from the Independence Palace. President Diem's campaign against the VCI was effective but indiscriminate. By authorizing province chiefs to execute suspects without a hearing or even a police record, he in effect encouraged abuses. There is little doubt that many political enemies—who were not actually VC—disappeared as a result of the anti-VCI campaign. In any event, Mr. Diem's efforts ended with his overthrow in late 1963.

The successive South Vietnamese governments after him were too beset by power struggle to take any interest in combating the VCI. Lacking direction and guidance, no GVN organization took this task seriously or was equipped to monitor and take action against it.

The Armed Forces believed that they had no responsibility for action against the VCI; that was the exclusive responsibility of the National Police. The National Police meanwhile were undermanned for the task and ineffective. Therefore, despite suffering heavy losses on the battlefields, the enemy continued his terror and sabotage campaign right in the Saigon metropolitan area, collected taxes, recruited personnel, and gathered supplies under the very noses of the police.

Not until 1967 was the vital role of the enemy infrastructure perceived as the political and administrative arms of the Viet Cong.

Its vital missions were to provide support to VC military forces by supplying them with money, food, equipment, medicines, manpower, and services; to prepare for the eventual takeover of the government by securing the allegiance of the people of the South; and to prepare a cadre capable of playing leading roles in a future coalition government.

The importance of the enemy infrastructure was finally realized by the U.S. The plan to eliminate the enemy infrastructure, proposed by the U.S. and approved by the Vietnam government, was put into effect in 1967 and made public under the appellation of *Operation Phoenix* in August of 1968.

Operation Phoenix

The enemy infrastructure was organized from the central level to the rice-roots level and existed in three important organizations: the Central Office for the South (COSVN), the National Front for the Liberation of the South (NLF), and the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP).

In areas under Communist control, the Viet Cong infrastructure controlled the population, collected taxes, impressed the people to work and farm, operated people's courts, and drafted the people into military service. In contested areas the enemy infrastructure disrupted the government's rural programs, conducted assassinations, kidnapped hamlet and village officers, collected taxes with the aid and support of armed guerrilla bands, sabotaged routes of communication, conducted financial, economic and trade operations to supply its armed forces, carried on propaganda activities, and operated a communications and liaison system. In areas under government control, the underground's operations were entirely covert and assumed both legal and illegal aspects. Agents were legal when they lived in government-controlled areas, had legal identification papers, and held ordinary jobs which were used as cover for their activities. Illegal agents had no legal residence, were not on the family census cards, had no legal identification papers and no employment.

The operations of the VCI included terrorist and sabotage activities; covert propaganda activities; purchase of important supplies such as medical and pharmaceutical products and controlled merchandise such as power generators, outboard motors, FM radios and so on; sheltering cadres on temporary assignments from outside city limits; storing documents, weapons and explosives; and supplying intelligence information. In short, the VCI operated as a *de facto* government in areas under its control and guided VC operations in contested and government-controlled areas. In concert with armed guerrillas, regional forces and special mission units when needed, VCI was an important and effective force in the war of insurgency and sabotage. Its operations gave the impression of communist omnipresence and versatility, eroding the people's faith in the government.

The strength of the VCI was estimated at 80 to 90 thousand just before the *Tet* Offensive of 1968. During this offensive, the covert personnel were assigned the mission of surfacing to fight in the cities, attacking military targets, serving as guides to enemy troops, inciting the people to revolt, and supplying Communist military units. As a result of this emergence from cover, as many as half of the VCI personnel were killed.

Were it not for their exposure during this offensive, members of the VCI would have been difficult to flush out and destroy in any significant numbers. Unlike the Communists' armed units which had names, designations, habitual areas of operation, recognizable fighting methods, and whose activities could be detected through different sources of information, VCI was hard to identify because of the small size (three to ten persons) of its cells, its dispersion and immersion in the population, and its clandestine and irregular activities.

When MACV began planning a program to combat the VCI in 1967, the planners realized that gathering intelligence was one of the first tasks to be accomplished. After that, forces had to be available to deal with the VCI units and members uncovered. It was therefore obvious that close coordination between civilian and military intelligence agencies and between the police and military units had to be developed. It was out of this concept of coordination—*phoi hop* in Vietnamese—that the name

for the operation was derived. The initial letters of *phoi hop* could also stand for *Phuong Hoang* which was the name of the mythical "King of the Chickens" who lived in the deep forests and devoured millipedes. The VCI was lined to the millipede and the *Phuong Hoang* would devour the VCI. The Americans understood that the Vietnamese had named the operation after a powerful bird, but since western mythology didn't have a "King of the Chickens," the immortal *Phoenix* was substituted.

The *Phoenix Program* was organized from the national down to the district level. The operating agencies at the provincial level were Provincial Intelligence Operations Coordination Committees (IOCC); those of the district level, District Intelligence Operations Coordination Committees.

Conceived as a long-range program, *Operation Phoenix* was to be executed both in war and peace and the National Police were responsible for its execution. At all levels, military and civilian intelligence agencies cooperated closely in gathering, comparing and evaluating information on the enemy infrastructure, and in supplying objectives for military operations.

Missions against the infrastructure could be conducted as combined operations under the command of Coordination Committees acting in conjunction with RVNAF or allied forces, or as unilateral operations. Combined operaions normally occurred when there were search-and-destroy operations, pacification operations, and operations against the infrastructure occurring in the same area at the same time. In such situations the armed forces would provide logistical support such as transportation and security against Communist military reaction by setting up security belts on the perimeter. RF and PF units would have the mission of encircling objective areas, protecting police search-and-screen teams and establishing combined tactical screening centers.

At the provincial and district levels, police chiefs, in their capacity as Second Vice Chairmen of the IOCC, directed the ARVN S-2's and S-3's who were heads of the situation section and the operations section respectively.

The operational forces organic to the National Police were the Field Police Forces. These forces conducted encirclement, raid and