Indochina Monographs

Reflections on the Vietnam War

General Cao Van Vien and
Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen

U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
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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
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Preface

The Vietnam War was an unusual and complex experience. Directed and sustained by Communist North Vietnam under the label of national liberation, it combined the elements of insurgency and conventional warfare. It began with guerrilla tactics but developed into and concluded with open invasion. Basically, however, it remained an ideological conflict whose ultimate outcome depended on popular participation and support.

The requirements to fight this war were multiple and challenging. Counterinsurgency demanded that we mobilize our resources to strengthen the regime, protect the people and obtain their allegiance, root out the enemy infrastructure, and extend our armed forces to maintain security over the national territory. All this had to be done in the midst of mounting political dissent and social divisiveness. To meet the threat of large-scale conventional attacks, we had to contend with enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries, the inhospitable terrain of our extensive borders, and uninterrupted infiltration. However, our efforts were greatly restrained by limited forces and prevailing policies.

To analyze critically the chain of events which shaped the final outcome of the war in order to learn from our failures and successes, we have drawn primarily on our first hand knowledge of major events and our personal involvement in the conduct of war efforts. We hope that in addressing the salient points raised in all previous monographs of this series with fresh insights, our work will be able to provide a critical, comprehensive view of the war experience on the South Vietnam side.

In the preparation of this monograph, we are indebted to several of our collegues for their valuable contributions. Lt. General Ngo Quang Truong, Commander of I Corps, and Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, Commander of the 3d ARVN Infantry Division have provided us with their critical view of tactical aspects of the war and the employment of forces. Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho and Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chiefs of Staff for J-3 and J-2, JGS respectively, have refreshed our memories concerning major events of the war and contributed constructive suggestions.

Finally, we are 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 that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. 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 our manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
20 December 1978

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CHAPTER I

Nation-Building and Insurgency: 1954-1963

The Geneva Agreements of 1954, which put an end to the French-Viet Minh War in Indochina, split Vietnam into two parts along the Ben Hai River at the 17th parallel, intended as a temporary demarcation line. Close to one million North Vietnamese inhabitants chose to migrate south where, together with the southern-born people and the National Army of Vietnam, they expected to build a new nation. With the direct support provided by the United States, South Vietnam was to become a free republic devoted to the anti-Communist cause.

Soon after its regrouping from above the 17th parallel, the French Expeditionary Corps began to leave South Vietnam, and French authorities also turned over full sovereignty to the nationalist government led by Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem. The French Military Mission, which advised the Vietnamese National Army, was replaced by a joint U.S.-French training mission (TRIM) until 28 April 1956 when the French High Command in Indochina was disbanded, marking the end of French involvement in South Vietnam. From that day onwards, the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG-V) took over the mission of training, reorganizing, and advising South Vietnam's armed forces.

Concept of Defense

The U.S. military strategy in Southeast Asia at that juncture was no doubt heavily influenced by the U.S. war experience in Korea during 1951-1953. In helping South Vietnam reorganize its national defense, MAAG-V therefore propounded the concept of deploying conventional infantry forces in depth from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) southward to face the

eventuality of overt aggression from the North. As conceived by MAAG-V, the primary mission of the Vietnamese National Army in this defense posture was to fight a delaying action in case of invasion pending a direct intervention by SEATO forces.

South Vietnam's military authorities fully concurred with this defense concept. However, they did not regard it as the only strategic approach to meeting the Communist threat. Based on their experience during the early period of the Resistance war and the subsequent fight against the Viet Minh alongside French forces, South Vietnamese military leaders also advanced the concept of territorial or area defense as a complement to conventional force deployment. This concept envisaged the division of the RVN territory into areas of defense, each to be placed under the control of a territorial command whose responsibility was to coordinate all military activities designed to maintain security within its area of responsibility. To fulfill this mission, each territorial command was given control authority over all military, para-military, and police forces assigned, to include mobile intervention units attached to it by the regular army.

MAAG-V authorities concurred in part with this territorial defense concept when they initially approved the RVNAF force structure to be composed of two elements: strike units (field divisions) and area defense units (light divisions and separate territorial regiments). In time, however, they rejected this concept altogether. MAAG-V therefore devoted its advisory efforts and all military assistance resources to organizing, training, and equipping the RVNAF as a conventional, anti-invasion military force.

The conventional war of aggression that MAAG-V strategists had assumed and for which they had helped South Vietnam build its defense did not materialize when the first signs of Communist aggression were detected. North Vietnam must have learned a lesson from the Korean War. It had seen how an overt act of aggression had failed in the face of determined and concerted reaction by the Free World under U.S. leadership. Taking advantage of its strong point which had proved successful against the French, North Vietnam began to wage people's or insurgency warfare

with the purpose of seizing control in the South. Toward that end, Hanoi had reactivated the local Viet Minh infrastructure and guerrilla elements which had remained behind in 1954 and at the same time reinfiltrated the southern-born Viet Minh cadres and troops who had regrouped to the North and received insurgency training there.

During the initial phase of insurgency the underground Communists employed every subversive tactic in an attempt to control the resource-rich and populous rural areas. These were precisely the areas which had not received adequate attention in the RVN defense system.

Not until 1961 did MAAG-V realize that to ensure proper protection for South Vietnam and save it from a Communist takeover, the country's defense should be founded not only on its capability to face an invasion from the outside but also on its ability to maintain security within the national borders. From this awareness, a compromise concept combining anti-invasion defense and territorial security began to evolve. But six years had elapsed and were irretrievably lost. Had the area defense concept been properly emphasized from the beginning, South Vietnam's defense efforts in terms of training and force structure organization could have been more equitably distributed between anti-invasion and territorial security capabilities. And if at the start of Communist insurgency South Vietnam had had adequate territorial forces to maintain effective security, especially in vital areas, then perhaps its general posture by 1961 would have been much better.

Organization and Training

Command and Control

The initial dissension in defense concept between MAAG-V and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) led to the existence of two systems of command and control: territorial and tactical. The territorial system consisted of four levels of control headquarters: military region, subregion (French subdivision), sector, and subsector while the tactical system was composed of corps headquarters and infantry divisions. Although separate, both were placed under the control of the JGS.

The RVN believed that the territorial command system was necessary to control and coordinate area security activities. This belief derived from lessons learned during the 1946-1954 French-Viet Minh war. Thus in spite of MAAG-V's objection, the RVN continued to maintain this system after the French departure. South Vietnam at that time was militarily divided into three military regions, nine subregions and 45 sectors. In 1957, the subregions were deactivated following the gradual grouping of separate infantry regiments and battalions into divisions. The sectors therefore became directly subordinated to military region headquarters.

As security continued to deteriorate, the GVN felt an acute need to improve effectiveness in controlling and coordinating territorial military activities, especially in MR-1 (which encompassed then the territory of former Cochinchina) whose headquarters was overburdened by the increased tempo of insurgency. In 1960, therefore, the GVN decided to reduce MR-1's span of territorial control by creating MR-5 -- with its headquarters at Can Tho -- which was assigned responsibility for the Mekong Delta. As a result, South Vietnam had four military regions, each directly responsible for from 5 to 16 sectors or provinces.

In spite of its leverage in dispensing military aid, MAAG-V did not pressure the GVN into disbanding the territorial control system which it disavowed, apparently because of political sensitivities. In keeping with its original defense concept, MAAG-V concentrated instead on developing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and consolidating the ARVN command and control system. These efforts resulted successively in the activation of seven infantry divisions by 1957, a Field Command in 1958, and three corps headquarters in 1959.

According to many South Vietnamese military authorities, however, the ARVN Field Command was not a MAAG-V sponsored product. They believed that its activation had been motivated by internal politics. In any event, from its inception to 1964 when it was finally disbanded, the ARVN Field Command accomplished nothing significant in connection with combat operations. Moreover, it was criticized as being a holding area where military officers who were distrusted by the regime marked their idle time.

The activation of corps headquarters, however, received wide acceptance among the RVNAF. Most authorities regarded it as the hallmark of South Vietnam's coming of age in terms of military growth. Aside from national pride, the GVN also felt gratified by the additional support assets these army corps provided despite the possibility that their activation would upset and complicate the existing territorial command and control system.

Indeed, this soon proved to be a substantial impediment to effective command and control. The difficulties stemmed from the fact that each corps was assigned the same area of responsibility as a military region and from the lack of directives defining the respective authority of a corps and a military region commander and the relationship between them with regard to common problems of defense and security. Both the corps and the military region commander, therefore, seemed to enjoy an equal authority since both were equally responsible to the JGS. This situation gave rise to duplication of responsibility and overlapping of authority between the corps and the military region commander, which inevitably entailed jealousy and conflict. Both felt equally responsible for the maintenance of security and equally empowered to employ military forces assigned to their area for that task. Each also reported directly to the JGS and even to the Commander-in-Chief (President) for every event that occurred within his area of responsibility. The victims of this confusion were the infantry division commanders, caught between their direct superior, the corps commander, and the territorial chief; they could not satisfy the demands of one without incurring the wrath of the other. If a division commander failed for example to make his units available for territorial security duties at the request of the military region commander, his uncooperativeness could be reported to the President. On the other hand, if he met the military region commander's request, he risked reprimand by the corps commander for insubordination.

The realignment of territorial organization during 1961-62 which saw the deactivation of military region headquarters and the addition of another corps, each responsible for a corps tactical zone (CTZ), effectively resolved difficulties in command and control. This was in

essence a compromise of defense concepts which offended neither MAAG-V nor the JGS since it provided for territorial control at the region and subregion level through the creation of division tactical areas (DTA) without impeding unity of command. Still, being a compromise, this solution seemed to please neither, especially the JGS.

To the RVN authorities, the deactivation of military region headquarters and assigning territorial responsibilities to corps and the half-hearted revival of the old subregion organization by making infantry divisions responsible for it indicated a certain reluctance on the part of MAAG-V authorities to regard territorial security as a truly primordial task. Indeed, MAAG-V seemed oblivious to the fact that the problem of territorial security encompassed much more than just combat activities. By its permanent nature, the task of maintaining territorial security involved innumerable administrative and support activities designed to sustain combat actions on a continuous basis which only a permanent territorial organization could provide. Tactical activities were essentially temporary; they flowed and ebbed and they might even cease altogether during certain periods of lull. While tactical units -- corps and divisions -- could be redeployed at will depending on requirements, those forces responsible for territorial security could not. This was both dictated by the nature of a war in which enemy attacks were usually unpredictable and the strategic necessity to exert a constant military pressure on the enemy in order to counterbalance his protracted warfare and guerrilla tactics.

A territorial control system, therefore, had to be construed as the backbone of the counterinsurgency war machinery, the mainstay of tactical forces on which their performance and effectiveness necessarily depended. Consequently, we believe that in the first place the importance of territorial security should have been correctly assessed and given proper priority within the framework of counterinsurgency efforts. Once this primordial condition had been met, it ensued that American and South Vietnamese authorities should be able to face the defense problem squarely and explore it in depth in order to take proper, realistic actions. We are convinced that at that early stage of the

war, the activation of army corps was not a real necessity and that efforts should have been devoted instead to consolidating the territorial defense system and making it effective. This could be achieved by reinforcing command and staff capabilities at the sector level and at the same time reducing the span of control of military region headquarters, making them more effective in the coordination and control of territorial security activities. To the best of our judgment, each military region should be responsible for no more than five to seven provinces at the most, and the size of each sector headquarters should be commensurate with the territory and forces under its control. We do not think that the deactivation of corps headquarters would have had any adverse effect on the conduct of the war at that juncture aside perhaps from a feeling of organizational regression which, from a psychological viewpoint, might just be a mild and passing revulsion. The consolidation and buildup of a strong territorial defense and control system no doubt would have incurred additional expenditures and manpower, but we think that this was an indispensable cost.

The deployment of infantry divisions for the defense and protection of populous and resource-rich areas was certainly a logical move. However, the assignment of permanent tactical areas of responsibility (DTAs) to divisions and burdening division headquarters with territorial duties appeared to be too much of an expediency to suit a protracted war. Moreover, this affected the mobility of infantry divisions which were designed to operate as strike forces, and the fact that these mobile units stayed in a certain area for a long time made their extrication extremely painful and damaging because of the physical and psychological void they would leave behind in that area. Definitely, the confinement of all nine ARVN infantry divisions to permanent areas of responsibility was not a satisfactory solution to the problem of territorial security.

Some authorities had proposed an alternative which would reinstate the old subregion headquarters, thereby freeing divisions from territorial duties and alleviating the overwhelming control burdens placed on military region headquarters. This was an entirely feasible solution, they felt, because if need be, we could always deactivate some divisional headquarters

and reallocate their manpower and equipment to the subregion commands. Then the disconnected regiments could be reassigned as subregion intervention or reserve forces. As to the remaining divisions once disengaged from territorial responsibility, they could be employed as region intervention or reserve forces. At the discretion of the JGS and depending upon the tactical situation, these divisions could take turns receiving MR assignments in certain well-defined but limited areas of operation for short periods of time. While this idea sounded tempting because it would help strengthen the territorial security system and provide substantial strike forces for the subregional level, we think that its major flaw lay in the creation of an intermediary command echelon, making the system administratively cumbersome and operationally slow. Also, the reduction of infantry divisions was not something to be taken lightly in the face of stepped up combat requirements.

The best solution in our judgment would have been to realign our territorial organization into seven or nine military regions, each controlling from five to seven sectors. The best employment of our nine infantry divisions would have been to maintain them in a general reserve status and alternately assign them as required to military regions for the conduct of pacification operations within a specific and temporary area of tactical responsibility.

At the top level of the defense structure, the RVN organization for command and control underwent no change when MAAG-V assumed advisory responsibilities for the Vietnamese National Army in 1955. This organization remained essentially as it had been except for a few minor alterations especially in the areas of finance and logistics. During this period, the double subordination of technical services -- to the Ministry of Defense command-wise and to the JGS support-wise -- caused numerous difficulties in coordination and combat support, making both slow and ineffective. This situation seemed to be perpetrated by political motives. The directors of these services generally outranked the JGS staff division chiefs; most also enjoyed the trust and esteem of the regime, being themselves affiliates of political organizations loyal to Mr. Diem. As a result, they did not have much respect for the JGS or its authority.

Top-level defense organizations abounded. There were policy-making bodies such as the National Security Council (NSC) and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and under them, the Permanent Secretariat of Defense (PSOD) and the JGS. But no one among them was entrusted with real authority, and their services were seldom appropriately used. As far as defense policies and military matters were concerned, President Diem seemed to trust only himself and his brother-counselor. Between them, they devised policies, studied problems, made plans, and then privately issed directives to the executors, often down to a low level and usually bypassing channels. The conduct of the war, therefore, suffered from lack of uniform planning and coordination. The PSOD, for example, which was intended as an executive body in charge of monitoring, coordinating, and following up on the execution of NSC decisions made in the framework of total war efforts, was left in a position of impotence and inaction just like the Field Command and, to a lesser extent, the JGS. From the day he took power, President Diem never trusted the JGS or made proper use of its planning capabilities. He became even more estranged with the JGS especially after the paratroopers' abortive coup in 1960 and the aerial bombing of his palace in 1962.

The fact that the JGS always performed the duties of an Army command in addition to its joint responsibilities clearly violated an important principle of staff planning and operation in spite of the economy in personnel and facilities. The JGS, therefore, tended to devote most of its efforts to day-to-day ARVN operations to the detriment of joint and long-range planning. Despite MAAG-V recommendations, President Diem never fully consented to the idea of a separate ARVN command. When he finally but reluctantly approved its activation in 1962, he failed to give this command organization any terms of reference with regard to its authority and responsibilities vis-a-vis the JGS.

Regular Combat Forces

The upgrading of our infantry organization into divisions was definitely a sound and prescient move even during the incipient stage of insurgency in view of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) development

trends. It effectively gave a strong backbone to the developing ARVN, making it a proud and formidable opponent of the NVA and enhancing South Vietnam's self-assurance at the same time. MAAG-V's effort to standardize the organization of ARVN infantry divisions by 1959 facilitated their uniform administration and training. However, the deployment of all seven divisions in an anti-invasion disposition near border areas practically left a force vacuum in the Mekong Delta, the primary target of Communist insurgency in view of its rich resources and dense population. This was an unwise force disposition which obviously contributed little to the GVN effort of keeping insurgent activities under control since at that time all para-military forces such as the police, the Self-Defense Corps (SDC), and the Civil Guard (CG) were still in their formative stage.

The GVN corrective action in deploying the major part of these divisions back to populous centers in 1961 was a timely albeit somewhat expedient move which responded well to the stepped-up tempo of insurgency. The same could be said of efforts to activate two additional divisions, four separate infantry regiments, and 86 ranger companies to reinforce the defense of rural areas. Other efforts to equip ARVN armored cavalry units with M-114 then M-113 APCs and the effective support of U.S. helicopter units also contributed to improving significantly the combat effectiveness of ARVN infantry units.

Under MAAG-V sponsorship and instigations, formal tactical training in schools and in units was well organized and progressed smoothly phase after phase as scheduled. The nature and purpose of this training effort, however, was purely conventional; it did not help combat units cope with the unconventional requirements of counterinsurgency warfare and fight it effectively. Many unit commanders in effect complained of having to "learn one way and practice another way." Naturally, U.S. Army doctrine and field manuals served as the guide and yardstick in developing ARVN combat capabilities.

The year 1961 was perhaps the turning point in our training approach. MAAG-V published a guidance on "Tactics and Techniques of Counterinsurgency Operations" designed for ARVN use. Drawn upon lessons learned from

the First Indochina War and counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaysia and the Philippines and adapted to the Vietnam context, the tactics and techniques propounded were appropriately responsive to the flexible requirements of the war at that juncture. Tactical training subjects, therefore, had to be revised and almost completely rewritten in order to place the ARVN commander and his unit in an environment of small-unit activities apt at any moment to upgrade into one of concentrated, combined-arms operations of large scale. In addition to adapting programs of instruction to counterinsurgency requirements, training efforts also sought to improve combat leadership both in the field and in rear bases. All this appeared to be pointing in the right direction as far as the ARVN was concerned.

Territorial Forces

In contrast to the ARVN development process, the building of local or territorial forces was entirely a South Vietnamese initiative and undertaking. During this period, the defense of villages and hamlets was organized at the GVN discretion without the benefit of MAAG-V advisory assistance. Basically, the close-range defense of village and hamlets was assumed by armed elements called the Self-Defense Corps (SDC); beyond the boundaries of villages up to the district level, the Civil Guard (CG) took over. The SDC and CG forces were placed under the operational control of village and province chiefs, respectively. Their activities were coordinated with those of the police for the purpose of maintaining local security.

The concept of using village inhabitants and arming them for the defense of their own communities derived from the age-old, proven practice of pioneer farming in Vietnamese history. Based on the principle of "citizen in peacetime, soldier in war time," this concept was entirely responsive to counterinsurgency requirements. Indeed, for a man to dedicate himself to fighting, there was no motivating force stronger than the need to protect his own family and defend his own home. Technically, he also fought better because he knew in detail his own environment. This was basically the rationale behind the SDC organization.

Ideally, of course, all inhabitants of a village or hamlet regardless of age and sex should actively participate in its defense and fight with every kind of weapon available, from home-made machetes to government-issued rifles. Thus conceived, village defense should not be the sole responsibility of SDC elements. This was the best and least expensive but also the most difficult concept of defense because its successful implementation depended on the villagers' motivation, good organization, and dedicated leadership. In the Vietnam context, it was not always the local government officials who could achieve this; in many instances, success rather depended on the leadership and motivation provided by religions, civic associations, and political groups. Typical examples of effective local defense could be found among Catholic refugee communities, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai villages, and in those areas where the influence of long-standing political parties such as the VNQDD and the Dai Viet was strong. On the other hand, failure was common among villages formerly under Viet Minh control in spite of local governments and self-defense organizations.

The Civil Guard Organization derived from the concept of auxiliary force prevalent during the semi-colonial period. Basically organized into separate companies, the CG was the principal force employed by sector commanders to maintain local security. Its success frequently depended on intervention or support provided by regular army units. Many believed that the CG would not have existed had it not been for the divergence of defense concepts between South Vietnamese and MAAG-V authorities and especially the MAAG-V imposed ceiling of 100,000 men for the National Armed Forces in early 1955. In any event, the existence of this GVN-supported military force proved to be beneficial to counter-insurgency efforts in the years ahead.

Not being the benficiaries of the U.S. military assistance program (MAP), the CG and SDC had to go through an extremely painful and difficult formative process during their initial stage of organization, especially in terms of equipment and logistic support. Naturally, their equipment consisted of nothing else but an assortment of obsolete weapons and long outdated stocks of ammunition, all discarded and left behind by

French forces. The CG or SDC trooper participated in combat activities with apprehension; in contact with the enemy, his ammunition often would not go off and was not always resupplied in time. Placed low in national priorities and not being part of the regular army, both the CG and SDC were denied a fair share of manpower resources and did not receive adequate support in logistics and in training. From their inception, they had never been properly trained, whether individually or as units. As a result, their ineffectiveness in counterinsurgency activities was inevitable.

As the fighting intensified, the Civil Guard in particular was called upon to assume increasingly heavy combat responsibilities not unlike those of the regular army. Yet its organization, pay, and other benefits were much below what the regular army enjoyed. Because of this low standing and indifferent care, a certain complex of inferiority and envy developed among its ranks, which eventually affected the performance of the CG as a combat force.

South Vietnam's territorial defense underwent a radical movement beginning in 1961 when the U.S. military assistance program was extended to the CG and SDC and U.S. advisers were assigned to the sector level. Concomitantly and working hand in hand with the GVN, MAAG-V initiated a program designed to improve and develop the territorial forces with particular emphasis on basic organization, equipment, and training. The SDC was uniformly realigned into standard squads and platoons for assignment to hamlets and villages respectively. This organizational concept was logical and fully compatible with the geographical configuration of the South Vietnamese village whose hamlets were sometimes several miles removed from one another. Despite this, SDC units continued to operate as a standing military force detached from the total context of village defense. MAAG-V and the GVN seemed to be devoting most efforts on developing the SDC capabilities and not enough on improving village defense through popular participation. Yet both must have been aware that in a counterinsurgency environment, the success or effectiveness of rice-roots level defense depended not so much on a standing force alone as on full participation by all villagers in one capacity or

another. Still, this standardized SDC organization often appeared not very flexible in meeting defense requirements, especially for large villages having more than five hamlets. In those cases, some upgrading in organization seemed to be indicated for better control, administration, and care of SDC troops. For example, hamlet squads could be grouped into inter-hamlet platoons and village platoons into a company.

As far as the Civil Guard was concerned, the fact that it continued to operate as separate companies independently from the regular army appeared not very responsive to the war situation by that time when most enemy guerrilla and local forces had been upgraded into companies and battalions. The separation of the CG and the ARVN also did not help resolve the former's combat support problems and its feeling of inferiority or inadequacy. It might even alienate one from the other in the long run.

We believe that both MAAG-V and the GVN should have taken advantage of the U.S. President's decision to strengthen South Vietnam's defenses at that juncture to revise the total counterinsurgency force structure by integrating the CG into the ARVN and making both a fully-integrated military force. The CG should have been then upgraded into infantry battalions organic to and operating under the control of sector commands. This would have helped remove the physical and psychological gap between territorial and regular forces and improve administration, support, and command and control, making both more effective. Since infantry was the main counterinsurgency force, this force should have consisted of two complementary components: a strategic and tactical strike component (infantry divisions) and an area security component made up of separate infantry battalions and groups. These area or territorial units could have alternated between static defense duties beyond the SDC capabilities and reserve or strike duties at the sector level.

Some believed, however, that President Diem, suspicious as he was, could hardly be amenable to this concept of force integration especially after the 1960 abortive coup by ARVN elements. This might be true, but even if he had rejected this move, he would probably have agreed to upgrading CG companies into battalions, which, to our judgment, was a

tactical necessity, given the size of engagements prevailing at that time. There was no doubt that company-level activities no longer responded effectively to the requirements of stepped up fighting. In the counter-insurgency context of South Vietnam, we believe that the smallest size and best suited unit was the battalion. Only the battalion had the capabilities and an organization flexible enough to meet the fluid tactical requirements of counterinsurgency warfare. For example, a battalion could break down into small units to conduct saturation patrol activities designed to keep a constant pressure on the enemy. If required, it could also quickly reassemble to cordon and search an insecure village or mount a concerted attack against local enemy forces in coordination with other combat arms. But some contended that during that period of time it was almost impossible to upgrade the Civil Guard into battalions given its insufficient cadre resources. While it was true that the Civil Guard and even the RVNAF were critically short of cadres at that juncture, we feel that this problem could have been solved within a reasonable time with appropriate planning. However, we could not achieve this without first formulating our tactical needs and deciding on a proper concept of force structure organization in the case of the Civil Guard.

In terms of equipment, the replacement of all obsolescent weapons by standardized U.S. armament identical to that used by the RVNAF gave the CG and SDC a substantial edge in combat performance. Logistically, it helped make training, supply, and maintenance uniform; psychologically, it boosted the morale of CG and SDC troopers who now fought with more self-assurance. MAP budget limitations, however, prevented improvements in communications and transportation. From villages to district headquarters, radio communications were virtually non-existent, which made it impossible to dispatch village security and intelligence reports in time. Liaison was normally accomplished by road, and village officials were usually compelled to use private means of transportation. Communications from district to province headquarters, which made use of obsolescent field radio sets left behind by French forces, were sporadic and unreliable. There was almost no military transportation available for sector and district operational use. For CG troop movement to combat

areas, province chiefs usually relied on public works trucks or requisitioned civilian buses. Keeping combat operations a military secret was therefore difficult because in an insurgency war the enemy's ears and eyes were almost everywhere. This was both a weakness and disadvantage for the GVN.

To train the CG and SDC, MAAG-V devoted extraordinary efforts to the establishment of SDC training centers in almost every province and the employment of mobile training teams. Entire SDC squads and sometimes platoons took turns undergoing training at these centers where new CG recruits also received basic and advanced individual training. As to CG companies, they received in-place training conducted by mobile training teams. The training process, as a result, advanced rapidly. The availability of provincial training centers also made both training and family visits convenient for local SDC troops. Despite these advantages, the dilution of facilities and resources tended to make training less uniform and deprived SDC training centers of adequate training aids, a good firing range, and suitable exercise grounds. With the assistance of U.S. advisers, programs of instruction were well and comprehensively prepared but heavily oriented toward techniques and tactics. They did not include any part on political indoctrination which was of prime importance in an ideological war. In addition to professional training, therefore, the CG and SDC soldiers should have been made conscious of their duties and responsibilities toward public safety and local security and above all the reasons why they fought. For the SDC in particular, political indoctrination was indispensable and should have covered both full-time and part-time elements.

Counterinsurgency Strategies and Tactics

Pioneer Farms and Agrovilles

Pioneer Farms and Agrovilles were primarily two socio-economic programs designed by the GVN under the First Republic to solve the food and subsistence problems of a country ravaged by nearly a decade of war and threatened by Communist aggression. Both programs reflected, however,

a long-range strategic concept whose purpose was not only to extend security to outlying rural areas but also to deny Communist insurgents the use of such areas. President Diem certainly deserved the credit for foresightedness because he had correctly surmised what kind of warfare the Communists would wage in South Vietnam. He understood well that one primordial rule of insurgency warfare was to secure firmly-established sanctuaries in outlying places -- swamps, jungles, and mountains -- and use them as staging areas from where to extend activities into the populous lowlands and urban centers. Pre-empting the use of areas susceptible of becoming sanctuaries by the enemy would certainly deprive him of a sure footing. The best approach to this would be to pre-position our own people, especially those from well-organized and well-motivated communities to keep watch over these areas and transform them into defense bulwarks.

Being a deeply patriotic man and a dedicated anti-French nationalist, President Diem must have carefully studied the Viet Minh resistance movement, especially its staging areas and safe havens throughout Vietnam. If the Viet Minh were to attempt a conquest of the south by using the same warfare strategy, he was almost certain where and how they would begin. As a result, President Diem systematically proceeded to preempt the Viet Minh's return by turning their former strongholds first into pioneer farming areas and later agrovilles. Most of these farms and agrovilles were strategically located throughout South Vietnam's high plateau and swampy areas from the DMZ to the Ca Mau peninsula. To populate these outlying places he brought in North Vietnamese Catholic refugees, Catholic farmers from Central Vietnam, and retired servicemen and their families, all of whom he knew were staunchly anti-Communist and loyal. His action proved prophetic because throughout the insurgency war that broke out soon afterwards, the Communists were using the same base areas they had used before against the French.

The results of the Pioneer Farm and Agroville Programs were not the same in every area. Some settlements were successful enough to serve as excellent staging areas for operations against the enemy's war zones and bases throughout the war; they also contributed significantly to our

efforts at reducing the extent of enemy control. Some, however, turned out to be failures and had to be abandoned. The primary element of success in most cases, besides strong motivation and good leadership, was the indispensable mutual support between the settlement and an urban or rural area where GVN control was firmly established. More to the point, it was the availability of road access which made intervention by governmental troops possible when the settlement was under enemy pressure or attack. As for the settlements that experienced failure, the conditions were invariably adverse. Failure in most cases could be attributed to: poor leadership, lack of dedication on the part of government cadres, low morale among the settlers, and physical isolation of the settlement area because of remoteness or inadequate road access. Other cases of failure resulted from involuntary displacement of settlers or inability of governmental troops to intervene in time.

Both the Pioneer Farms and the Agroville Programs could have been more successful had the GVN enjoyed the liberty of using its armed forces for this purpose. Army units could have served as the motivating force which attracted settlers and helped them build their communities physically and morally. They could assist in construction work, train the people in self-defense, and provide protection by conducting patrols and preventing the enemy from returning to the settlement area. To bring this program to success, more aid would have been required in terms of road building machinery and defoliation. This was needed to improve road access, clear jungles and transform the wilderness into farmland, and make these large former enemy base areas accessible to long-range patrols and serve our tactical advantage in the event of war. The history of Vietnam fully demonstrates that this concept of military-civilian cooperation in pioneering farming had made it possible for the Vietnamese people to extend their territory to the tip of the Indochinese peninsula and defend it effectively. Furthermore, counterinsurgency experience also taught us that an effective road and waterway communication system was the key to pacification success. It seemed to tell us that security went only as far as the road or the canal, which prompted many to call the Vietnam war a war of bulldozers and dredgers. To a certain extent this was true.

Strategic Hamlets

Critics of the Strategic Hamlet program alleged that the GVN and its U.S. advisers had transplanted this strategic idea in pacification which had proved a success in Malaysia a decade earlier but failed to take heed of an important fact: that British concentration measures only affected the Chinese who were the source of insurgency, not the indigenous Malays. In South Vietnam, these critics remarked, those who were forced to live in strategic hamlets were the indigenous peasants whose lives had been deeply rooted in their native villages for generations.

This critical remark was true only as far as forced living was concerned, which caused resentment among those people affected. The strategic hamlet concept itself, however, was not necessarily an adaptation of British strategy in Malaysia despite apparent similarities. This concept had antecedents in Vietnamese history which dated back to the period of Chinese domination, but the most striking and recent precedent was perhaps the "combat village" defense system established during the 1946-1954 war of resistance against the French. To curtail French control, the Viet Minh government practically turned every village into a resistance nest and used the popular saying "when bandits break into a house, even a woman fights back" as an effective combat motto. The corral-like configuration of the village especially in North and Central Vietnam lent itself to excellent defense against penetration with its high, thorny, and dense bamboo hedge enveloping the habitations inside like a solid, almost impenetrable rampart whose single opening made access control most convenient.

It was this concept of "combat village" that inspired the strategic hamlet defense system. But if this concept had successfully worked in North and Central Vietnam because it required no dislocation of the rural population, it posed a big problem in South Vietnam, especially in MR-3 and MR-4. The fact was that in South Vietnam the village was much larger and consisted of separate hamlets pyhsically removed from one another and often made up of scattered individual habitations. The GVN concept of village defense, therefore, was based on the hamlet, which alleviated problems of barrier organization but in many cases still involved regrouping of the scattered hamlet population.

Regrouping was indispensable for improved protection and better defense although painful for the dislocated people involved in the process. However, dislocation and interruption of the normal life pattern were not new to the South Vietnamese rural people who had voluntarily left their homes vacant and their gardens unattended during the resistance war. Dislocation needed not to be painful if it had been thoroughly explained and understood as a necessity required by the people's own safety and dictated by the national cause.

Criticizing a strategic concept by just dwelling on its single aspect of dislocation was perhaps unfair, narrow, and prejudicious. Such a criticism reflected an incomplete understanding of the Vietnamese people and its historical experience. Regardless of what had been said about it, the strategic hamlet program remained a judicious national policy, a true antidote to Communist subversive and total warfare. Its chief merit lay in the fact that it had been comprehensively designed to improve the people's living standards through socio-economic development at the rice-roots level. It was a sound strategic concept whose objective was to neutralize and counterbalance the effects of a war without frontlines by transforming the countryside into a system of mutually-supporting fortifications. It sought to build and consolidate the spirit of self-assurance, self-reliance, and voluntary participation which would sustain the nation's efforts in a protracted war of attrition.

Finally, the strategic hamlet program should prove to be a less costly defense enterprise in the long run, but its success depended on perseverance and continued popular support. Indeed, only the people could neutralize the subversive effects of insurgency warfare, and only the hamlet residents in particular could identify and eliminate the insurgents. For counterinsurgency purposes, no other motive could be stronger than the need to protect one's own family and property. This was the overriding self-defense principle on which the strategic hamlet concept was built.

The major flaw of this undertaking stemmed primarily from the methods and spirit with which local government officials implemented the program. Driven by overzeal and a desire to please President Diem, these officials

failed to work out basic plans designed to prepare the local people psychologically for the event and elicit their voluntary participation. In the complex and difficult political situation of South Vietnam at that time, this process required patience and persuasive skills. The first step that would have paved the way for success was to explain how the program would benefit hamlet residents and those who had to resettle in terms of security and protection against Communist insurgents. This step was important because South Vietnam was a free country and the people should be given time to weigh these benefits and decide for themselves to accept sacrifice. But instead of doing this, local governments had acted in a most mischievous manner, conducting for example swift cordon operations to round up people and move them against their will into designated hamlets where resettlement facilities did not exist. Often, hamlet people were also forced to perform maintenance on CG and SDC outposts or to clean them, which provided an opportunity for local officials to claim efficiency and popular support.

The end result was that instead of voluntary participation, a primordial condition for this national policy to achieve success, the strategic hamlet people found themselves living in a state of represeed feelings, suspicion, and frustration. Under such circumstances, enemy propaganda and criticisms directed against the government surely combined to edge these people into confusion and disaffection. In the meantime, strategic hamlet residents were yet to see for themselves what the GVN had brought them in terms of socio-economic upward mobility. For all practical purposes, the GVN also seemed to fail in this regard; its promises could not be honored because of the limitations in support resources available.

The fact that the Communsits were giving top priority to disruptive efforts designed to dismantle the strategic hamlets testified to the partial success of this program. Technically, the program had indeed succeeded in controlling the hamlet population and isolating them from parasitic Viet Cong agit-prop agents and guerrillas. It also won over a large segment of rural society to the national cause. The eventual continuation of this basic strategy with a few modifications under the

pacification program, which was undertaken by the Second Republic and fully supported by the U.S., further demonstrated its soundness, adaptability, and responsiveness to the war situation at the rice-roots level. It was a regret that as an ally in war, the U.S. had taken so long to realize the full impact of Communist insurgency and make the proper move to fight it effectively. Had the Agroville and Strategic Hamlet programs benefited from the same kind of support given to pacification, we believe that the turn of events would have drastically changed.

Elimination of the Viet Cong Infrastructure

As early as 1958, the GVN had recognized the important role played by the Communist infrastructure in a war of subversion and sabotage. Elements of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in effect acted not unlike a shadow government where their influence was strong. The incited and directed subversive activities in areas being contested or under GVN control. These activities gave the impression of ubiquitous Communist presence and consequently impaired popular confidence in the GVN.

We believe therefore that regardless of adverse political consequences, President Diem's decision to eliminate the VCI, the active Communist war machinery in South Vietnam, was perhaps the most clear-sighted offensive move at that early stage of insurgency. Directed against the enemy's most vulnerable point, this move was to achieve the best results through economy of force despite its low profile. President Diem had correctly surmised that once this nerve system was destroyed or neutralized by GVN actions, the body limbs (assassination squads, village guerrillas, local forces etc.) would either be completely paralyzed, or their activities would be disjointed, ineffective.

President Diem began his offensive action by promulgating successively ordinances Nos. 6 and 47 during 1956 and the famous 10/59 decree-law, which completely outlawed the Communists and any actions deemed detrimental to national security. The 10/59 decree-law in particular drew intense fire from political figures of the opposition who regarded it as paving the way for bloody repressions against dissenters and dictatorship. The most apprehensive provision of this legislation was

the creation of special military tribunals empowered to impose the death penalty within three days of trial on those defendants convicted of flagrant or premeditated acts of sabotage or in violation of national security.

Despite its harshness, this law was indispensable in that it dealt forcefully and promptly with acts of sabotage or subversion and effectively deterred their perpetration. Experience seemed to dictate that there was no other effective way against Communist violence. To destroy the will of insurgents, a measured stick would be needed in order to induce them to bite the carrot; half-measures could only spell failure in view of Communist intractability. What mattered most was not the promulgation of a punitive law but how this law could be correctly implemented.

To their credit, the GVN security and law enforcement agencies under the Diem regime did strike effectively at the VCI, but at the same time they also bore down upon the wrong elements. Their mistakes caused a great apprehension among those who had fought the French in the resistance movement and among the opposition leadership, feeding dissension and disaffection. More specifically, "special action teams" in MR-1, a virtually private security force owned by Mr. Diem and controlled by his youngest brother, Mr. Can, for purported VCI elimination purposes, became the object of controversial opinion because their actions were also directed against political dissidents. To some extent, these repressive actions degraded the anti-Communist cause and alienated the public.

The fact that President Diem gave direct orders to province chiefs for the elimination of the VCI also gave rise to much speculation and suspicion. It appeared that these orders were all verbal instructions specifying the liquidation of the most dangerous VCI cadres. As a result, only the ordinary, rank and file VCI elements were ever brought to trial by military tribunals. Arrests and suspects were numerous, but the trial process usually took too long, which impelled GVN authorities to expand or build more detention facilities.

Another significant shortcoming which affected the effectiveness of VCI elimination efforts was the lack of a unified and extensive

intelligence system at the rice-roots level, the lack of cooperation between military and civilian collection agencies at all echelons, and the absence of cordinated actions between security and combat forces. On the other hand, the local population in villages and hamlets was not effectively organized and motivated to participate in intelligence-gathering activities because the intelligence and security network, military or civilian, seemed to stop at the district level. ARVN and CG combat units on operations were usually not given adequate information on the local VCI; besides, they were also little interested in this type of information, regarding the VCI not as their main target. The SDC was perhaps the most knowledgeable about the VCI but lacked the self-contained capability to destroy it especially in outlying hamlets. It was also not properly used for intelligence-gathering or elimination purposes. The national police, meanwhile, appeared to possess extensive information on the VCI but was reluctant to share what it considered as private property with other agencies. This was a waste of resources because police forces by themselves were incapable of destroying the VCI especially in outlying areas where only ARVN units could operate.

Area Security

In the history of Vietnam, the frontier outpost had played an important role in the defense against foreign invasion and the gradual southward expansion of the nation. The outpost concept had also been used successfully by French forces in South Vietnam during the First Indochina war. The French had built an elaborate system of watchtowers and outposts to control the areas they had pacified and to keep Viet Minh activities in check[1]. This system continued to be used by the GVN throughout the war for the same practical purposes.

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[1]Le Duan, then President of South Vietnam's Administration Committee admitted in an article published by Nhan Dan Mien Nam (People of the South): "The enemy is holding the initiative while we are on the defensive. This is because he has cut up our zone into parcels and enveloped us with a crisscrossing system of watchtowers and outposts along lines of communication and deep into villages and hamlets."

As pacification progressed, the system of watchtowers and outposts also expanded. By simply looking at the pattern of this system, one had an instant idea as to what areas were under GVN control and where the enemy's zone lay. The structural sophistication and capabilities of each outpost or watchtower depended on the enemy's capabilities in the area and the size and mission of the unit in charge. As a rule of thumb, the stronger the enemy, the more elaborate and more fortified the outpost. In general, watchtowers were built high along lines of communication and waterways to provide good observation. Each was usually manned by a SDC squad or combat team with the mission of observing the local area assigned and reporting on enemy activities, especially troop movements and road sabotage.

Interspersed among the watchtowers were the outposts. An outpost was an elaborate fortification with watchtowers and bunkers capable of firing in all directions and usually built to control vital points such as important bridges, road intersections, ferries, etc. Each outpost was usually manned by at least one CG platoon or company which was responsible for supporting the watchtowers and conducting patrols in the area. In addition to area watchtowers and outposts, there was also one SDC outpost for each village, usually built near or within the premises of the village office. This outpost was manned by a SDC squad or platoon which protected the village office and served as the village's intervention force.

The existence of outposts not only conditioned military thinking; it also became ingrained in the hearts and minds of the people. To them, outposts symbolized the strength and authority of the government, its determination to stay among and protect them. As a result, the construction of a new outpost, the loss of an old one to the enemy, or the evacuation of an outpost because of tactical requirements, all had a meaningful significance and affected their lives as well as their morale. Because of this, GVN and military authorities were usually caught in the dilemma of having to choose between military requirements and the people's morale and confidence. The enemy was no doubt fully aware of the military and psychological significance of outposts. He developed

several tactics designed to neutralize their effectiveness. By attacking, laying siege or simply putting pressure on an outpost, the enemy definitely wanted to achieve a certain military goal. But above all, what he really sought was to destroy the symbolic significance of the outpost and to prove to the local people that he was strong and his presence ubiquitous.

The outpost concept by itself had several shortcomings. It was first and foremost expensive, especially in terms of manpower, communications equipment, and construction and barrier materials. To be effective, an outpost required a good size military force and an elaborate defense system. Because the central government usually lacked resources for adequate support, local governments frequently prevailed on material and labor contributions from the local population for the construction and maintenance of outposts. Although this practice was expedient and effecient militarily, it could be detrimental to the GVN efforts of winning over the people psychologically.

The outpost system also dispersed and diluted the GVN combat and combat support resources. We wanted to be militarily strong everywhere but we ended up weak and vulnerable in many places. As a permanent objective, an outpost offered the enemy the advantage of carefully planning for its attack or moving past it. By staying with an outpost over a long period of time, the unit in charge developed a familiar pattern of activity and eventually lost all initiatives, tending to remain inside the defense perimeter. This practically gave the enemy free use of the surrounding area and control of the outpost's access. Tactics that the enemy developed over the years to control the countryside had taken full advantage of the outpost's basic weaknesses. Most familiar were harassment actions designed to restrict patrol activities, ambushes on patrols or main access routes, and attacks combined with ambushes (cong don da vien) to destroy intervention forces. All of these enemy actions gradually impaired the district's or provinces's capabilities in maintaining security.

The success of the area security concept, which was centered on the outpost system, depended primarily on intervention forces at all levels,

effective communications, fire support, and mobility. Intervention forces played a role of primary importance not only in ensuring our defense but also in deterring enemy actions.[2] Their presence and capabilities made the enemy think twice before attempting to attack our outposts; they also enhanced the initiative of local military authorities. If enough intervention forces were available, they could be employed to exert a constant pressure on the enemy through various tactical actions, thereby throwing him off-balance and on the defensive. During this period, however, not all districts and provinces had enough forces for direct intervention purposes. They all had to rely on the DTA, CTZ, or even JGS level whose intervention forces certainly took a longer time to reach the outpost under attack. Direct fire support for the outposts was also non-existent in the majority of provinces. Only a few more important provinces were assigned one or two 2-piece 105-mm artillery platoons.

In case of enemy attack, an outpost lucky enough to have a radio set could request the district chief for relief. If the district chief did not have an intervention force, he could always relay this request to the province chief. But in most cases, even the province chief was unable to meet this request immediately. Both therefore could do little else than pray and hope that the outpost would hold until morning because only then could the province's intervention force, if available, be deployed safely. This cautiousness did not necessarily reflect the lack of aggressivity on the part of local authorities; it was primarily dictated by experience. The wary commander knew full well that an enemy ambush was waiting for the intervention force on its way to the outpost. Experience taught him that in most cases the outpost could hold off the attack by itself but very few intervention units ever escaped unharmed from an ambush at night.

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[2] Many district and province chiefs managed to set aside a SDC plato or a CG company for intervention purposes, but they did not have transportation facilities for quick troop movement.

One of our most experienced and dedicated combat officers, Major Nguyen Viet Thanh, commander of the 6th Tactical Group at that time, commented thoughtfully: "I don't believe that our province chiefs or tactical commanders are being lethargic or lacking in aggressivity. They always try hard to find and fight them (the VC) but rarely come in contact. Now if they surface and attack us, this must be a good opportunity to maneuver our forces and destroy them. I am sure that every commander welcomes this opportunity. But deploying our forces in haste at night surely means destruction because they would run into enemy ambushes before reaching the objective. If an outpost is attacked, it's best to support it with flares, tactical air, and artillery so that the defenders can hold until daylight. But if this support is unavailable, there is nothing else we can do."[3]

The fact that the VC seemed to dominate night life in many rural areas prompted many to observe that CG and SDC units in general did not know how to conduct and shunned night activities. This observation was correct but not entirely true. It was obvious that only through night activities could we neutralize or control enemy actions such as propaganda tax collection, road sabotage and outpost attacks, and gradually wrest back night initiative. To this effect, the JGS and CTZ and DTA headquarters had published countless reminders. But while local and small-unit commanders all seemed to be aware of the importance of night activities, they were also unable to carry out instructions. This seemed rather illogical because they, like the VC, were well familiar with the local terrain and environment. Why couldn't they operate at night as well as the VC?

It was a fact that the war had upset the life pattern of both sides. This was true of our civilian population, local officials and military units. Each side endeavored to exploit its own strengths and the other's

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[3]Major Nguyen Viet Thanh had participated in combat actions in North Vietnam during 1952-1954. Promoted brigadier general, he successively commanded the 7th ARVN Division, then IV Corps. He died of a helicopter accident while observing the battlefield during the 1970 cross-border operation.

weaknesses. The Communist insurgents usually operated at night and rested during daytime to recover the stamina for the following night. They could do this because during the day their rest was not disturbed by family problems, and their hideouts were usually located underground or in outlying areas. On our side, this was almost impossible. Those who were familiar with CG and SDC unit activities at their outposts would agree that these units could not and were not prepared to conduct night activities for several reasons. First of all, they devoted all their energy to daytime activities; at night they were too exhausted to go out. If an outpost or unit commander broke down his troops into day and night shifts, of course night activities would have increased, but at the same time day activities would have decreased. The day shift naturally could not perform all the duties normally assigned. Given the usual understrength of almost every CG and SDC unit, this division of forces could also weaken the unit's combat performance in case of enemy attack. This was because the night shift troops could not always enjoy a complete rest at the outpost during the day. Their sleep was usually disturbed by unit activities and restlessness caused by the change in habits.

This state of things was best summarized by Captain Sau, one of our best and most experienced CG company commanders in the Can Long District, Vinh Binh Province, one that the enemy fearfully dubbed "The Devil," when he reported the following to the province chief in 1961: "As a commander of a CG unit responsible for an outpost, I am fully aware of the importance of night activities such as patrols and ambushes in keeping a constant pressure on the enemy. But I have to admit that my night activities cannot be sustained at a desirable level. My company has been assigned too many tasks, and its area of responsibility is also too large. It is constantly understrength, never reaching above 65-70% of authorized strength. My recruiting efforts are not successful; very few youths want to enlist. For combat operations, I can usually muster only 60 or 65 men, which is too little in case of firefight. With this strength, I cannot push my men into too much night activity in addition to day-time duties. Doing this just wastes their energy and can be

counterproductive. Despite this, I have managed to put together a special squad for night activities or more exactly, night ambushes. I don't think that patrolling deep into villages and hamlets at night is advisable. Even during daytime, a squad on patrol would have a hard time when engaged by the enemy.

"The best way to conduct a successful night ambush is to leave a squad behind in the pre-planned ambush area during a company operation. This area has been divided into grid squares. My tactic consists of having the squad broken down into cells and moving them into ambush positions in these grid squares at night on a random basis, changing the pattern every night for three to five consecutive nights at a time. This tactic proves more effective than straight ambush on a certain line given the unpredictability of enemy movements. My difficulty is food and radio communications. There is only a single TR-5 radio set for my company and the CG is not issued combat rations. In several cases, it was the lack of food that defeated my ambush plans. Such night ambush activities, if prolonged, are a great drain for a squad, physically and mentally. That is why I have to rotate its members. If my company is up to strength, I can set aside one or more additional squads for night ambushes. And if we also had combat rations and adequate, effective radio communications, then I am sure the enemy would have a much harder time."

As for the SDC, Captain Sau believed that requiring a SDC platoon to conduct night activities in addition to patrol and guard duties within the hamlet was not realistic. Such peripheral activities were the responsibilities of the CG, but even the CG did not have enough capabilities to meet them satisfactorily.

These comments made by Captain Sau were truthful and indicative of what the CG and SDC could and could not do. As the primary forces responsible for the maintenance of territorial security, both the CG and the SDC were plagued by many problems, especially understrength and inadequate equipment. If these forces were to operate effectively against Communist insurgents around the clock, their problems should have been resolved in the first place. Then additional efforts should have been devoted to educating and training them for night combat and motivating

their cadres to become aggressive and resourceful. Perseverence and initiative were indispensable for counterinsurgency warfare just as adequate strength, training, and support were essential to keep our combat forces operationally effective to fight it.

Mopping-Up Operations

Since districts and provinces had virtually no intervention forces of their own, the relief of enemy pressure in insecure and contested areas depended primarily on regular ARVN forces. Acting usually upon requests by province chiefs, division commanders launched short-duration operations for the purpose of clearing enemy forces from a certain area, hence the popular name mopping-up. Mopping-up operations were usually conducted by infantry regiments or regimental level units and sometimes by airborne or Marine battalions of the JGS general reserves.

The most common tactic used by ARVN forces during mopping-up operations, one that had become classic during this period, was the pincers movement toward the objective. In most cases, the objective was a hamlet where local enemy forces had been reported to penetrate or take shelter or from where guerrilla activities usually emanated. Once the objective had been occupied, the ARVN forces conducted a search which was frequently fruitless because they were unfamiliar with the hamlet and lacked accurate information. Often they also seemed to have inadequate time for the search, having to cover long distances to reach the objective and return to base or move on to another objective. The results of the operation were almost always measured in terms of enemy and friendly casualties and the number of weapons captured or lost. Rarely, if ever was the problem of winning the people's hearts and minds taken into serious consideration. Having not contacted the enemy who had probably gone into hiding or escaped before troops arrived, ARVN forces terminated their operation within a few days. As friendly troops were gone so was the pressure on the enemy.

As to the enemy, his usual tactic to counter our mopping-up operations was to harass and delay our troop movements by sniper fire, mines, and booby traps. Also he might withdraw to neighboring hamlets and

wait out the operation, then return and harass or ambush our troops on their way back. The VCI members and local guerrillas frequently hid themselves in underground shelters or mixed with the local people fleeing to nearby hamlets.

Regardless of the outcome of these operations, the local people living in the objective area turned out to be the principal victims. They suffered from actions by both sides, but more frequently from mischievous acts committed by operational troops. We had several opportunities to listen to their complaints, and these complaints reflected their attitude toward troops of both sides. A village elder lamented: "We fear Saigon troops more than we fear provincial troops. They seem to create havoc wherever they go. We really don't mind if they pick some fruit or some vegetable but we are mad when they chop off the plant and trample the entire garden." Another grieved: "Government troops seem to vent their frustration with the VC on us. They (the VC) provoke them and run away, leaving us behind to suffer the consequences; our homes are destroyed, our belongings lost."

Also invariably, as ARVN troops approached a "contested" village or hamlet during a mopping-up operation, the villagers fled to nearby areas, usually in the direction of more insecurity or enemy control. As it turned out, this flight was made under enemy coercion. Confided some of the villagers: "Not fleeing? It's impossible. They (the VC) forced us to leave, especially the male youths. Only old people and children were allowed to stay behind, and they were ordered not to cooperate with government troops. If we failed to obey them (the VC), we would have a hard time later when you left. We had to do this because we knew you (ARVN troops) or provincial troops would never stay very long." Asked why they did not flee to GVN-controlled areas, some answered: "We had to do what they (the VC) told us in the first place. But whenever we could, we usually turned around and fled toward the direction of government outposts. That is why many of our men and youths managed to take refuge in towns and cities."

Another shortcoming of mopping-up operations was the lack of coordination between intervention forces (ARVN) and local authorities or

units. The commander of such an operation usually outranked the district chief or even the sector commander. He rarely deferred to these local authorities, listened to their advice, or coordinated his intelligence and combat activities with them. Some, however, were dedicated to the common effort and willingly coordinated operation plans with province chiefs. They also tried to obtain additional information from the sector S-2 and the provincial police, especially concerning the identification of local VCI cadres. But more often than not, there was little the sector S-2 and the police could provide. Both seemed to be uncooperative with each other and did not possess any information of real value for operational purposes. Because of these difficulties, a mopping-up operation rarely eliminated the local VCI despite the number of enemy troops killed and weapons captured.

In time this shortcoming was somewhat alleviated by assigning the local SDC squad to the mopping-up task force. This cooperation proved productive and was a gratifying experience for both. The SDC troopers usually felt proud of their chance to operate alongside an ARVN unit. They were effective in assisting ARVN troops to identify the enemy from among the villagers or apprehend those ensconced in secret hideouts. On their part, ARVN troops showed their gratitude toward the SDC members at the end of the operation by giving them extra ammunition, especially hand grenades which they valued the most for the defense of their outpost. But the use of the local SDC also had some constraints of its own because the squad had to be returned to their outpost duties at the end of each day. This required a transportation service to shuttle it back and forth daily for the duration of the operation.

In general, the cooperation between ARVN and territorial forces made mopping-up operations much more effective. Territorial units were especially useful serving as blocking or screening forces while ARVN units searched and destroyed the enemy. The difficult thing for ARVN forces was the shortage of transportation and communications required to coordinate with territorial authorities during the planning and preparatory phase. Another difficulty was the absence of overall guidance directives for effective coordination between area security and

mobile intervention forces. This could have been overcome by a detailed standing operating procedure, improved and updated as required to keep up with the situation and organizational trends.

In the face of an evasive enemy who had the ability to concentrate or disperse in a short time and launch attacks at any moment of his choice, the RVNAF had yet to come up with an effective countermeasure. The practice of employing divisional units as intervention forces to make the round of needy sectors proved expedient but not responsive to area security requirements in the long run. A more satisfactory approach in our judgment would have been the formation of local intervention forces organic to districts and provinces. These forces had the advantage of being familiar with the local terrain and population, an important factor in anti-guerrilla and psychological warfare. If such forces had been made available, the province or district chief would have been able to react promptly to any situation requiring timely relief such as when a hamlet or outpost was being attacked or under heavy pressure, thereby enhancing the morale of defenders and the confidence of the local people. The availability of organic intervention forces would have also made it possible for territorial commanders to exercise initiative and more aggressiveness. A province chief might, through the judicious rotation of his forces between static and mobile duties, employ his intervention capabilities to exert a constant pressure on the enemy, primarily his command and control system and local forces, forcing him to be continually on the defensive. He could achieve this by a combination of various tactics, for example shifting efforts between area saturation patrols and "spot" cordon and search or conducting search and destroy operations with the outpost forces serving as blocking and screening forces.

We believe that the military situation during this period would have been much improved if each district had been able to employ a company or battalion and each province a battalion or regiment depending on local requirements as intervention forces. In addition to this, the MRs and the JGS should also have had adequate division-level tactical and strategic reserves ready to intervene forcefully and en masse where there was heavy enemy pressure or a conventional attack by NVA units.

This does not imply that our infantry divisions should have stayed idle and intervened only when required. These divisions should have been rotated between rest and refresher training and combat operations limited both in time and space to certain tactical areas of responsibility. Depending on the situation, the TAORs selected could be in common provincial or MR boundary areas, the vicinity of guerrilla bases or war zones or even in the heart of these bases or zones whatever the circumstancial choice. These operations could have been primarily designed to sever the liaison and communication ties among local insurgent bases and between these bases and border sanctuaries and to disrupt the normal use of these facilities for shelter, training, and supply purposes.

The disruption of enemy base areas inside South Vietnam was a constant effort expended by the JGS and MR commands. During the 1958-1960 period, ARVN airborne, ranger, and infantry units had successively launched many reconnaissance-in-force operations against former Viet Minh bases such as War Zones C and D, Boi Loi, the Iron Triangle, and the U Minh Forest. However, these operations produced little more than indications of renewed activities and tapered off subsequently. ARVN forces then switched their efforts toward the rural areas which were being increasingly subverted by VCI and guerrilla activities. This practically gave the enemy a free hand in reorganizing and consolidating his base areas which in time became sanctuaries difficult to penetrate. During 1962-1963, CTZ commands again launched several operations into these base areas, but again our forces incurred heavy casualties and materiel losses without achieving anything significant.

The immense and rugged terrain of these bases, with which the enemy was entirely familiar because of long experience, placed our forces in a most disadvantageous position, psychologically, technically, and tactically. Even if they succeeded in penetrating these bases, they could not stay long because of resupply problems and more pressing combat duties elsewhere. Since they were unable to stay long enough, there was no hope that they could discover much, given the enemy's talent for camouflaging and dispersing supplies and his ability to take evasive actions. During that particular period, our intelligence on enemy bases

was also not very accurate, which did not help operational forces in any positive way.

Many strategists believed therefore that it was not to our advantage to strike at these bases, contending that this would only result in more losses and serve no practical purposes. First, we could not occupy these bases in permanence and second, these bases would become alive again as soon as our troops left. Consequently, they advocated concentrating our efforts on the prosperous and populous delta areas to create a position of strength there and be ready to pound on enemy forces whenever they left their sanctuaries. If we had the upper hand in delta areas and controlled them effectively, then the enemy in these base areas would be isolated and cut off from resupply sources, which in the long run would force him to move out and expose himself to our attacks. Once removed from his habitat and forced to fight on our terms in our own territory, the enemy would suffer heavy losses and eventually face defeat.

While this idea had some merit in that it would enable us to exert a constant pressure on the enemy where it mattered the most, we did not think that we could afford to leave these base areas alone. On the contrary, we should have harassed these base areas on a continuous basis or on occasions to reduce the enemy's war potential and to throw him off balance. This harassment action could be conducted by special strike force teams carefully trained in reconnaissance and commando tactics. To achieve best results, these teams should be deployed extensively to stalk enemy base activities, lay round-the-clock ambushes on enemy trails and conduct raids against enemy bivouacs, training grounds and supply areas as appropriate. Harassment actions should also be combined with occasional large scale raids or aerial strikes, focusing on vital objectives such as command headquarters, training centers, and logistic installations and conducted with the guidance of strike force teams already planted.

Significant Lessons Learned

1. The defense of South Vietnam was founded on an inappropriate basis at the start, focusing too much on anti-invasion and too little on internal security. War did not materialize under the form of a conventional invasion across the DMZ by NVA major units nor did it result in big conventional battles as in Korea during 1951-1953. Our main enemy -- Communist North Vietnam -- waged instead a people's or insurgency war with the purpose of taking over control in South Vietnam. All of the underground political organizations and local guerrilla forces that the enemy had built during his 1949-1954 war against the French and left behind below the 17th Parallel after the Geneva Agreements were revived and expanded with the re-infiltration of southern-born Viet Minh political and military cadres who had regrouped to the north.

2. After the outbreak of insurgency, the countryside of South Vietnam rapidly came under enemy subversion. Our hamlet and village officials, in spite of stringent screening and selection procedures, were not appropriately trained and indoctrinated to have a firm ideological stand and a sufficient knowledge of techniques and tactics to be used for the control and protection of the people against Communist subversive activities. Intelligence gathering capabilities were almost non-existent at the village and hamlet level. For the defense of villages and hamlets, the SDC and other militia elements responsible for hamlet security had been hastily activated and placed under the control of the village chief. They were neither trained nor indoctrinated, poorly led, and ineffective. The Civil Guard, the primary territorial force responsible for security beyond the confines of village and hamlets was also a heterogenous assemblage of different auxiliary force elements formerly employed by the French and servicemen of the National Army who had been discharged for reasons of force structure reduction. CG companies lacked capable cadres, were not properly trained and indoctrinated and were poorly equipped. They had only very limited combat capabilities.

3. Province and district chiefs, the local authorities who were primarily responsible for territorial security, did not have sufficient forces for the protection of vital installations in their areas of responsibility. In particular, they lacked reserves for intervention purposes in order to meet emergency requirements of the situation and enhance popular confidence.

4. The territorial command and control system (military regions, sectors), which was responsible for coordinating all civilian and military efforts for counterinsurgency purposes, did not receive proper attention. As a result, its capabilities were very limited. By contrast, the tactical system (corps, divisions) developed rapidly but did not have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate its capabilities.

5. The corrective efforts which had been initiated in 1961 with focus on the village and hamlet level were a move in the proper direction which greatly improved security in prosperous and populated rural areas. In the light of documents captured, our enemy had admitted that 1961-1962 were the most retrogressive period of his insurgency efforts.

6. Strategic hamlets proved to be effective in protecting the people against Communist subversive activities. They separated the people from the VCI and cut off a major source of manpower replacement for enemy guerrilla forces. The effectiveness of strategic hamlets would have been greater if the GVN and the U.S. advisory and assistance mission had developed a comprehensive plan seeking to coordinate all political, military, economic, and social efforts for counterinsurgency purposes and supported the program adequately. This program would have been more successful if it had been implemented by honest and capable cadres entirely dedicated to the people's service.

7. Improving the effectiveness of the Self-Defense Corps through reorganization, training, and equipment modernization was a logical step but the results would have been much better if the effort had not been limited to full-time elements and to counterinsurgency techniques and tactics. Hamlet security would have been much improved and the protection of the hamlet people against the VCI and the elimination of the latter would have been more effective if the improvement program had been

extended to part-time SDC members and village and hamlet officials and more emphasis had been placed on indoctrination and intelligence.

8. Our emphasis on training the Civil Guard resulted in increasing to some extent the effectiveness of this force. But these efforts were not enough to overcome other problems that affected the CG such as the shortages of cadres, lack of care, and the complex of inferiority with regard to the ARVN. The effectiveness of the CG would have been improved if this force had been integrated into the ARVN infantry forces and reorganized into separate infantry battalions to facilitate command, control, and administration. Once activated, these territorial battalions could be alternately employed to maintain area security and to serve as intervention forces under the control of district and sector commands. With a strong territorial force, divisional units would be freed from area security duties and could devote all efforts to mobile combat operations.

9. The redeployment of ARVN infantry divisions to lowland areas and their employment in conjunction with the CG to maintain area security effectively helped reinforce the people's confidence and enhance the morale of local government officials and territorial troops. This was especially true with the advent of substantial U.S. combat support such as army aviation, tactical air and the availability of APCs. All this had enabled sectors to set aside limited intervention forces and eventually helped improve rural security significantly.

10. The deactivation of MR headquarters and the transformation of corps headquarters into CTZ commands with territorial responsibilities effectively improved command and control in our counterinsurgency efforts. The division of each CTZ into DTA's and placing them under the control of infantry division commands also alleviated CTZ territorial burdens and contributed to better coordination and control of sector activities without additional expenditures. At that juncture, however, the formation of corps headquarters proved somewhat premature, and the creation of DTA's also interposed an additional command echelon which slowed down operational matters. The assignment of infantry divisions to permanent areas of responsibility was an expedient measure which did not respond

well to the protracted nature of insurgency war. It also impaired the mobile and strike capabilities of these divisions. The best solution would have been to reorganize the national territory into more military regions than we actually had and assign them direct control over a reasonable number of sectors. This territorial system should have been South Vietnam's defense backbone on which tactical units depended for effective operation and support.

11. The Buddhist turbulence in 1963 partially diluted our counter-insurgency efforts. The subsequent change in national leadership had the unfortunate effect of destroying the basic works that the First Republic had so painfully built for these efforts: the constitution, the national assembly, strategic hamlets, people's organizations, and the anti-VCI machinery. North Vietnam took full advantage of this political turmoil advocating neutralism, which further divided our ranks, and infiltrating more men and materiels with an attempt to conquer the South by a general military offensive and thus shorten its protracted guerrilla warfare. Because of these developments South Vietnam gradually retrogressed to the point of collapse which resulted in United States combat troops being introduced in 1965 to save our nation from Communist domination.

CHAPTER II

Americanization of the War: 1964-1967

Strengthening and Expanding the RVNAF

From 1964 to 1967, the RVNAF force structure expanded rapidly. In addition to the beefed up ARVN, it also absorbed the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps which were redesignated Regional (RF) and Popular forces (PF) respectively to suit organizational objectives. Both the Regional and Popular forces became territorial infantry components while the infantry divisions remained a major mobile strike force in this new realignment.

The inclusion of the RF and PF into the RVNAF force structure improved South Vietnam's conduct of the war in several ways. It unified command and control, concentrated efforts on defense, solved many problems faced by the RF in terms of morale, support, and care, and created favorable conditions for improving the effectiveness of these vital territorial forces. Despite these advantages, the new force structure realignment brought about additional burdens for the ARVN and some criticisms by certain military authorities and politicians.

According to these criticisms, by making the Popular Forces a component of the RVNAF, the GVN had unwittingly drifted away from the primordial precept of popular participation in counterinsurgency warfare. The First Republic administration had purposely formed the Self-Defense Corps as a para-military force, a non-regular militia which derived its strength from active popular participation. This concept of defense was the least expensive in terms of manpower and resources, a most vital requirement for an underdeveloped country with limited population like South Vietnam to meet the insurgent challenge in the long term. Ideologically, it was also a most appropriate approach to fighting Communist people's warfare. Incorporating the PF in the RVNAF implied the

exclusive use of able-bodied, male citizens, which absorbed a significant proportion of the valuable manpower rightly earmarked for regular and regional forces.[1] Eventually, this edged the GVN into a hard-pressed position during the final years of the war when it was unable to overcome manpower shortages faced by the ARVN and the RF.[2] The end result revealed that while the RVNAF appeared to be a large military force, their actual combat strength was far below their composite force structure.

The reorganization of the PF into standard platoons and assigning them on the basis of one platoon per village unwittingly weakened the village's defense posture by presenting a reduced and identifiable target for enemy attacks.[3] Instead of having to contend with the entire population of a village, which would have been the case if the people's self-defense concept had been implemented, the enemy had only to face 30 armed men in telltale uniforms. Although the PF had become RVNAF soldiers wearing uniforms and drawing military pay, they did not have a rank system like the ARVN or the PF but only positions, which made promotions, an important motivating device, extremely difficult. The employment of the PF as separate platoons placed under the control of civilian village governments and the fact that the territorial command system stopped at the district level practically placed these forces out of reach of the RVNAF. RVNAF command authorities, therefore, were unable to control the employment or properly care for the individual PF platoons.

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[1] 200,000 youths of draft age in 1971.

[2] A solution to this problem would have been to upgrade the PF into RF and the RF into regular forces, but this was not implemented for fear of increased desertion and possibly force disintegration.

[3] As a result of the 1961-62 improvement program each hamlet had a PF squad and each village a PF platoon. There were 4,560 PF platoons in 1968 and 7,872 platoons in 1972.

What the GVN and MAAG-V should have done instead of making the PF an integral part of the RVNAF was perhaps to develop further the concept of people's self-defense that the First Republic administration had implemented in 1956. The formation of the popularly-based Self-Defense Corps, whose organization and training MAAG-V had helped improve in 1960, embodied a sound concept of grass roots level defense which should have been maintained and strengthened as suggested in Chapter I. We strongly feel that several improvements could have been made in that effort such as: (1) expanding the SDC organization and training to include all standby elements, the foundation of village defense; (2) training and indoctrinating village chiefs and their security assistants, to include the appointment and formation of new cadres, in order to strengthen command and leadership and coordination of security activities at the village level; (3) appointing, if required, experienced NCOs or junior officers of local origin to serve as village security assistants, but placing more emphasis on promoting capable SDC members for such duties, and (4) detailing mobile military-civilian teams to hold seminars in village security and politics with the people and organize villagers into associations in order to strengthen popular confidence in the GVN and motivate popular participation in village defense against Communist insurgents. If these primordial tasks had been implemented satisfactorily, we believe that village defense across the country would have been much more effective than incorporating the SDC into the RVNAF which was not essential for that purpose. We strongly believe that a village's internal security and defense should have been the primary responsibility of the villagers and that the RVNAF territorial and strike forces should have been tasked only to ensure security outside villages and provide assistance in training, supplying, and supporting village defenders.

By contrast, the integration of Regional Forces into the RVNAF to become territorial infantry units was, in our judgment, a very logical step, an organizational trend which proved not only appropriate for the regional-minded society of South Vietnam but also eminently responsive to a war situation in which the decisive factors were familiarity with