

Canadian  
Forces  
College

Collège  
des  
Forces  
Canadiennes



## THE VIETNAM WAR: US MILITARY FAILURE TO ADAPT

Maj E.D. Angell

**JCSP 41**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

### **Disclaimer**

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2015.

**PCEMI 41**

***Exercice Solo Flight***

### **Avertissement**

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada, représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2015.

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES  
JCSP 41 – PCEMI 41  
2014 – 2015

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

**THE VIETNAM WAR: US MILITARY FAILURE TO ADAPT**

By Maj E.D. Angell

*“This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”*

Word Count: 5372

*“La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.”*

Compte de mots : 5372

The United States (US) military lost the war in Vietnam due to an inability to adapt its style of warfare to meet the threat. How is it that the nation that beat the Nazis and Imperial Japanese a few short decades earlier could not succeed against the relatively militarily weak nation of North Vietnam? Failure in Vietnam was rooted in a misunderstanding of the type of conflict and a failure to adapt. US commanders continually attempted to make the war fit their understanding of operations, not a true understanding of the conflict itself.<sup>1</sup> The combination of guerilla and conventional warfare that the US faced in Vietnam was, for the most part, met with superior technology, firepower and large unit actions as per established Army doctrine.<sup>2</sup> The US technology and firepower was mostly in the hands of poorly trained and poorly motivated troops fighting for no other apparent reason than to kill communists. The US believed that with perceived advantages in technology and firepower they could beat North Vietnam, regardless of their lack of a defined and coherent operational plan. This manifested as part of the US military thinking that relied on a belief that concentration and high volumes of firepower would win the war.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the war the US military did make several isolated attempts to fight a counterinsurgency war that was aimed at specific targets. While most American tactical battles were well fought and successful it was at the operational level that the largest disconnect occurred. Several programs were instated by various services of the military and US government such as the Strategic Hamlet Program (SHP), Phoenix Program and Combined-Action Platoons (CAP). Most of these programs were conducted on a small scale by small units with better than average soldiers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 856.

<sup>2</sup>J. A. Nagl, "Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: British and American Army Counterinsurgency Learning during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War," *World Affairs* Vol. 161, No. 4 (Spring 1999), 195.

<sup>3</sup>P. Melshen, "Mapping Out a Counterinsurgency Campaign Plan: Critical Considerations in Counterinsurgency Campaigning," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* Vol. 18, No. 4 (Dec 2007), 674.

Several of these efforts achieved positive results but were hampered by an entrenched conventional mindset amongst the military and a lack of operational synergy. The various services of the US military were conducting their own operations using various methods but these efforts were rarely reinforced or supported at the operational theatre level. There remained a preoccupation with the Clausewitzian concept of annihilation and US commanders consistently sought a decisive battle<sup>4</sup> in order to destroy the combat power of North Vietnam. An overreliance on static positions, such as firebases, to protect areas ensured that soldiers were diverted from successful programs to participate in these positions and were not amongst the population protecting the people of South Vietnam as is crucial in a counter-insurgency.

The two World Wars heralded the beginning of the end for colonialism in Asia and around the globe. As most European powers were busy fighting on the European continent, they had few remaining resources to maintain control in their respective colonies. During World War II (WWII), Vietnam was named French Indochina and was under French control. Once the French were defeated on the European continent their control of French Indochina began to weaken. In the interim of the war years the Vichy government in France controlled Indochina until the Japanese overtook the territory. Once the war had ended and the Japanese had been defeated, the French wished to reassume complete control.

The people of Indochina seized the opportunity afforded by the end of WWII. Their leaders were ready to fight for the de-colonization of their homeland and understood that France was severely weakened. Even so, the French had superior firepower and backing from the

---

<sup>4</sup>Paret, Craig and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 248.

US who were attempting to contain the “communist tide.”<sup>5</sup> Even with these advantages France could not regain control. Their biggest mistake was an underestimation of the foe that they faced. The French believed that they would face nothing more than unorganized rebels but instead found themselves fighting something closer to conventional warfare. The culmination of French efforts to regain Indochina came to a head at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The French commander, General Henri Navarre, did not believe that the Vietnamese could mount a serious conventional offensive.<sup>6</sup> He was wrong as the Vietnamese managed to defeat them decisively on 8 May 1954.<sup>7</sup> After the French were defeated they ultimately departed Indochina. This was followed by a partitioning of Vietnam into two countries; the north as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the south as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in July 1954 after the Geneva Conference.<sup>8</sup> The south was ruled a democratic system while the north was communist. The political will of leaders in the north was to unite the whole of Vietnam as one communist country.<sup>9</sup> As DRV began making menacing movements toward the south the US decided to intervene in RVN starting in 1961.<sup>10</sup> This decision would ultimately lead to a huge influx of American troops and equipment.

The war began for the US when guerillas began to cause problems for the RVN government. The presidency was held by Ngo Dinh Diem whose regime was not known for its

---

<sup>5</sup>Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: New York : Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>6</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 190.

<sup>7</sup>Edgar O'Ballance, *The Wars in Vietnam, 1954-1973* (New York: Hippocrene, 1975), 11.

<sup>8</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 199.

<sup>9</sup>Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978), 14.

<sup>10</sup>Kim Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York, N.Y. ; Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library, 1987), 17.

mercy toward any form of dissent.<sup>11</sup> Regardless the US decided to support Diem's regime in an attempt to stem the "communist tide" that was flowing into RVN.<sup>12</sup> This period of time was near the height of the Cold War and the US was concerned at the prospect of communism spreading throughout Asia. American politicians believed that if Vietnam fell under communist rule that many neighboring countries would be in peril as well. It was this concern that would prompt the US to commit huge amounts of resources to Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

The US' original objective was to conduct limited operations, essentially by providing civilian and military advisors to the South Vietnamese.<sup>14</sup> These advisors' tasks were to create the political and military infrastructure to set the conditions for the South Vietnamese to fight their own war. This was a popular US limited strategy in combatting communism as had been proven successful in Greece after WWII. Many American politicians were nervous about becoming involved in a major land battle to fight communism as had occurred in Korea.<sup>15</sup> It was with these considerations at the fore that US advisors began to restructure the South Vietnamese Army, better known as the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN).

The ARVN was trained and units were developed and equipped according to US doctrine. Originally the South Vietnamese wished to organize their military according to French doctrine because it was what they already knew.<sup>16</sup> The US countered this by stating that American advisors would be rendered useless by this because they were trained under US

---

<sup>11</sup>Frank E. Armbruster et al., *Can we Win in Vietnam?*, Vol. 2 (New York: Praeger, 1968), 86.

<sup>12</sup>Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 185.

<sup>13</sup>H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 184.

<sup>14</sup>George S. McGovern et al., *Vietnam: Four American Perspectives : Lectures* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>15</sup>McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, 44.

<sup>16</sup>O'Ballance, *The Wars in Vietnam, 1954-1973*, 182.

doctrine. The US military also had a general disdain for the French due to their poor performance during WWII and in Indochina. The French influence was seen as a weakening, not strengthening factor.<sup>17</sup> This was one of the first instances in which US military inability to adapt would undermine the war effort by straining the US-RVN relationship. “A critical point had already been reached in US-South Vietnamese military relations-the Americans were calling the shots.”<sup>18</sup> In the end the RVN agreed to form the ARVN along US lines because the US would not provide logistical support otherwise and they desperately needed the supplies that were being offered.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the ARVN was provided large amounts of arms and vehicles, making them superior in firepower to the guerilla threat faced at the time.

The US decision to back the Diem regime was a mistake. Diem was more concerned with securing his position than with fighting the communist threat.<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently he used many draconian measures to subjugate his own population. This drove many RVN people to become sympathetic to such groups as the Viet Cong (VC) and the communists as a whole. US support of Diem also alienated them from the general populace. Many times US military aid was used against revolts in RVN and not against communist forces. Diem’s tyrannical methods led to his ultimate demise as he was assassinated on 2 November 1963, with complicity by the US.<sup>21</sup> Once this occurred RVN fell further into chaos and it was time for the US to either leave Vietnam altogether or to escalate their troop commitment. The US

---

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>B. King, "Let the Tigers Fight," *Vietnam* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Oct 1999).

<sup>19</sup>McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, 32.

<sup>20</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 230.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 278.

president Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the conflict by surging 175,000 ground troops to Vietnam in 1965.<sup>22</sup>

Insurgency was already deeply rooted in RVN by the time US troops arrived. Under the political leadership of Ho Chi Minh and military leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap, communist soldiers had been infiltrating RVN ever since the French had been defeated in 1954.<sup>23</sup> “The Viet Minh turned to terror tactics that frequently involved the “trial” and execution of village officials, members of the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, and teachers and administrators sent from Saigon.”<sup>24</sup> These demonstrations of the Viet Minh’s power proved to the local South Vietnamese that their supposed “democratic” government was doing very little to protect them. As well, it proved that many of the so-called administrators sent from the RVN capital Saigon were merely minions of the Diem regime.<sup>25</sup>

An early program jointly established by the US and RVN in 1961 was the forced resettlement SHP coupled with a National Identification Program. These programs were an attempt to model the success of the British “New Villages” during the Malayan Emergency.<sup>26</sup> The motivation for this program was twofold. There existed a belief by some that “it was demographic change and social transformation, not military action that would set the critical context for the outcome of the war.”<sup>27</sup> Coupled with this was the need to provide safety for the population so they could not be coerced by guerrillas. The basic idea behind SHP was to re-

---

<sup>22</sup>Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War*, 19.

<sup>23</sup>Tom Clancy, Carl Stiner and Tony Koltz, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002), 161.

<sup>24</sup>Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, Authors Guild backinprintcom ed. (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Inc., 2002), 618.

<sup>25</sup>Armbruster et al., *Can we Win in Vietnam?*, 86.

<sup>26</sup>P. Dixon, "Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 32, no. No. 3 (Jun 2009), 354.

<sup>27</sup>G. Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: The New York Press, 1985), 132.



locate peasants and provide safe havens. “According to Saigon authorities, the peasants in their new or modified living environments would be safe from VC terrorism.”<sup>28</sup> The Viet Minh (who would later evolve into the VC) had been conducting a campaign of terror against RVN villages that were sympathetic to the Diem regime and had accepted US aid. It was believed that if safe havens could be established for these villagers then they would remain sympathetic to the South. This was also an effort by the US to win the “hearts and minds”<sup>29</sup> of the local populace. SHP worked as long as US patrols existed in the area. The US soldiers were there in order to achieve security in the area, train local constabularies and then leave the village security to RVN forces. The program was doomed to failure because once US forces left the area the local constabularies were unable to maintain the security of the villages.<sup>30</sup> US troops were often taken away from SHP in order to form units to be used in large-scale conventional operations by American commanders. The abandonment of these so-called “Strategic Hamlets” let the Viet Minh, and later VC, to infiltrate the villages and convince or coerce their leaders.

While the US military experienced some success with SHP, it ultimately failed to affect the outcome of the war. This was due to an operational failure to synchronize efforts between the various US military services to reinforce success and concentrate on counter-insurgency methods. This manifested specifically by drawing away manpower from SHP instead of providing resources. This was done in an attempt to decisively annihilate the military and guerrilla forces of DRV.

---

<sup>28</sup>James DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 149.

<sup>29</sup>Dixon, *'Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq*, 363.

<sup>30</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 323.

General Westmoreland (the commander of US forces in Vietnam during 1964-68<sup>31</sup>) and his subordinate commanders failed to realize that DRV was fighting two battles; the military and the political. US forces were attempting to annihilate the DRV units militarily, continually seeking a decisive battle like the one at Ia Drang in November 1965.<sup>32</sup> The US forces continually defeated the DRV forces on many occasions. This had no lasting effect as more people were recruited for the communist cause. Recruits continued to be plentiful simply because the US did little to win the support of the people. They concentrated on killing the enemy and not providing direct security for the RVN population.

This mindset would influence how the US military determined its operational Measures Of Effectiveness (MOE). The single most prevalent MOE in most operations was a “body count” of dead Vietnamese.<sup>33</sup> This MOE was provided at both the tactical and operational level as an indicator of how US forces were winning. In hindsight this was obviously a flawed concept.

What the US military needed to do was to break down the large size of its forces. Following the Western, Clausewitzian conventional style of warfare, the US leadership often concentrated their troops.<sup>34</sup> These troop concentrations would be secured at firebases throughout RVN. From there they would make large unit sweeps through areas in an effort to clear them of any guerilla presence. The operational method of establishing firebases was contrary to what General Westmoreland had stated himself. He insisted that a commander “wins no battles by sitting back waiting for the enemy to come to him”<sup>35</sup> which was highly ironic as Westmoreland

---

<sup>31</sup>Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, 2.

<sup>32</sup>Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 227.

<sup>33</sup>C. Malkasian, "Toward a Better Understanding of Attrition: The Korean and Vietnam Wars," *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 68, no. No. 3 (Jul 2004, 2004), 1.

<sup>34</sup>Paret, Craig and Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 204.

<sup>35</sup>P. Brush, "The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh," *Vietnam* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Aug 1997).

would later become one of the greatest supporters of the firebase strategy. One of these aforementioned firebases was Khe Sanh and stands as an excellent example of the misallocation of resources.

Most of the literature and ideas at this time during the Vietnam War were based on tactical and not operational concerns.<sup>36</sup> The US military was no longer concerned with the destruction of the enemy's "will to fight" on the moral plane but was centrally focused on physically destroying the enemy force as a whole. This idea helped to create many problems such as those faced at Khe Sanh.

Khe Sanh was a firebase that was strategically located on the Vietnamese-Laos border near the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) and had been garrisoned by US troops since 1962.<sup>37</sup> The firebase was deemed to be essential to the US effort in Vietnam. Westmoreland felt that Khe Sanh was critical for three main reasons.<sup>38</sup> The first was the fact that it gave the US a patrol base along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (HCMT), affording the ability to attempt to contain the flow of supplies and soldiers from the north. The second reason for Khe Sanh's existence was the fact that it occupied the western edge of the DMZ. This line was heavily defended and Khe Sanh was the last line of defense on its western flank. Lastly, Khe Sanh served to block communist forces from moving east toward the heavily-populated coast. If the communists could be kept out of urban areas, such as Hue and Da Nang, then US forces would be better able to protect the south.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1984), 93.

<sup>37</sup>Brush, *The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh*.

<sup>38</sup>Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, 140.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

The communists also realized the importance of Khe Sanh and undertook many strategies in order to undermine its effectiveness. During 1968, twenty thousand North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and VC troops encircled six thousand Marines at Khe Sanh. This made US re-supply a serious problem. If it was deemed safe, supplies could be flown in by helicopter, but often supplies were air dropped. The margin for error was small and supplies could easily fall to the communists. “Living off the enemy” was a very real and practiced concept. A considerable amount of VC supplies, including weapons and ammunition, were captured US equipment. This equipment was often captured from both US and ARVN forces.<sup>40</sup>

The encirclement of Khe Sanh also effectively prevented US forces from being able to patrol the area. This led to an infusion of supplies and men from the north along the HCMT. The US remained in the area, attempting to bring the communist forces into a decisive battle where they could be destroyed through superior firepower. Using firepower to achieve attrition was the favored means to defeat the communist forces around Khe Sanh. Noted Vietnam author, Stanley Karnow, goes so far as to state that “Westmoreland was delighted” because the communists were finally going to wage his type of war.<sup>41</sup> US commanders believed that at Khe Sanh they would be able to kill enemy troops in a ratio of 10, 20 or even 30 to 1.<sup>42</sup> “In engagement after engagement the forces of the VC and NVA were thrown back with terrible losses.”<sup>43</sup> This would prove to be irrelevant, for the DRV forces were prepared and willing to accept the one thing that the US would not: massive casualties.

---

<sup>40</sup>Robert B. Rigg, *How to Stay Alive in Vietnam: Combat Survival in the War of Many Fronts* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1966), 20.

<sup>41</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 538.

<sup>42</sup>Brush, *The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh*.

<sup>43</sup>Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, 1.

US commanders also believed that holding the firebase would deny the enemy a psychological victory.<sup>44</sup> This may have been the case, but once the troops inside Khe Sanh could no longer patrol the surrounding area the firebase became useless. The original strategy for holding the firebase was nullified by its encirclement. The troops used in defending Khe Sanh could likely have been better used elsewhere, had US commanders been able to recognize the changing situation. When asked about Khe Sanh, Westmoreland stated, “basically I see no requirement to change our strategy.”<sup>45</sup> While the NVA had US troops pinned down at Khe Sanh, they began building infrastructure to bring more force to bear in RVN. Several roads were established into the south meaning the communists no longer had to rely exclusively on the HCMT. It also allowed more men and supplies to be brought south quicker and in better condition. Some even suggest that the Khe Sanh battle was undertaken by DRV in order to allow its forces to build-up for the Tet Offensive.<sup>46</sup>

Under increasing NVA pressure US commanders finally decided that maintaining a firebase at Khe Sanh was useless and it was abandoned in June 1968.<sup>47</sup> This was shortly after Westmoreland had been replaced as commander of US forces in Vietnam by General Creighton Abrams. US commanders finally realized that “with nothing to be gained by the Marines at Khe Sanh beyond killing communists, ordering their withdrawal and closing the base was a sensible political and military decision.”<sup>48</sup>

Even before the outbreak of war, the US experimented with various irregular strategies to undermine the communist guerilla effort. One of the earliest strategies was an attack on the

---

<sup>44</sup>Robert W. Chandler, *War of Ideas: The U.S. Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 123.

<sup>45</sup>Brush, *The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh*.

<sup>46</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 542.

<sup>47</sup>Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, 141.

<sup>48</sup>Brush, *The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh*.

HCMT. By the time the US began large-scale intervention in 1965 the trail had been well established. The US realized the importance of the trail and began early attempts to render it useless. The government of Laos had little power to stop the flow of communist soldiers through its borders and the US had larger international concerns that could not be ignored. A full-scale attack into Laos was impossible. Even so, the US in conjunction with RVN managed to mount several attacks under the Typhoon Program.<sup>49</sup>

Typhoon was run under US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) guidance with RVN input.<sup>50</sup> The program took small flexible units and sent them into Laos to counter communist activity on the trail.<sup>51</sup> Units could act independently if required to accomplish different objectives or if they were split up by enemy action. The soldiers that were chosen for these missions were required to be airborne and commando qualified and of a superior nature.<sup>52</sup> Those chosen would most often be South Vietnamese so that they would be better able to blend into the surroundings and local population. These soldiers went into Laos without identifying features or uniforms and carrying foreign weapons. This allowed the entire operation to be denied if required.

These smaller units would most often be inserted by airdrop. If any of the men were injured on the drop they were often evacuated by helicopter. This was a very dangerous prospect for it greatly increased the chance that the unit was discovered and their mission compromised. Later in the Typhoon Program it was decided that airdrops were too costly and dangerous and men were infiltrated by ground from the emerging firebase of Khe Sanh.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup>K. Conboy and J. Morrison, "Early Covert Action on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," *Vietnam* Vol. 13, No. 2 (Aug 2000).

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

Once they had a “foot on the ground” these small patrols could survive for months relying on supplies that were flown in and dropped at certain prearranged areas. The units themselves would patrol in attempts to harass communist forces, gather information and do everything in their power to halt the communist effort along the HCMT. As the patrols reached the end of their mission they would simply sneak back across the Vietnamese border and then be escorted to a major center for debriefings. This was required in part due to the difficulty of communicating with higher headquarters while on mission.<sup>54</sup> The program was officially shut down because of reluctance on the part of Laos to let foreign military intervention into its borders.

In May 1964, the US would again attempt to stop the flow of communist forces through Laos. A new program called Leaping Lena was established in an effort to capitalize on some of the earlier successes of Typhoon.<sup>55</sup> This time the units were broken into even smaller units, eight-man reconnaissance patrols. Instead of following the trend toward ground insertions, Leaping Lena went back to airborne insertions. The operation was a dismal failure. Most of the patrols were captured and little if no significant information was collected.<sup>56</sup> The program was designated Project Delta in October 1964, but the plausibility of cross-border forays was severely undermined.<sup>57</sup>

The lesson the US took from this situation was that cross-border operations were too dangerous in terms of manpower and equipment assets. Instead of attempting to improve upon previous techniques, the US decided to rely on massive air bombardments such as Operation

---

<sup>54</sup>John D. Bergen, *Military Communications: A Test for Technology*, Vol. 91-12 (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1986), 28.

<sup>55</sup>T. Maitland and S. Weiss, *The Vietnam Experience: Raising the Stakes* (Boston: Boston Publishing Co., 1982), 142.

<sup>56</sup>Clancy, Stiner and Koltz, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces*, 199.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

Rolling Thunder<sup>58</sup>, mass deforestation with Agent Orange<sup>59</sup> and large firebases such as the one at Khe Sanh in order to control the HCMT. None of these strategies would be overly successful.<sup>60</sup>

A radically different approach that the US attempted in order to stem the flow of communist supplies was employing Vietnamese tribesmen, namely the Montagnards.<sup>61</sup> These tribesmen lived in the central highlands of Vietnam, an area that was recognized as being strategically important due to its proximity to the HCMT. The Montagnards were extremely impoverished and were often armed with little more than crossbows. US forces secured their assistance by providing arms and medical services. These tribesmen would eventually be employed in a small-scale CIA program titled the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).<sup>62</sup> The program consisted of fortifying Montagnard villages and conducting small unit patrols from them. These patrols were largely successful as the Montagnards acted as reliable porters and guides and were familiar with the terrain. The program eventually suffered from similar reasons that SHP did. As long as US troops and logistic support was provided the program was effective. As soon as that support was withdrawn the program could not sustain itself. As well, the South Vietnamese disliked working with the Montagnards for they considered them savages. Conversely the Montagnards did not want to come under South Vietnamese control but wanted the right to control their own destiny.<sup>63</sup>

Many people have criticized the US for not doing more to take the battle to the communists. The HCMT was indeed a well-known route (even during the war) for supplies and

---

<sup>58</sup>Ronald Bruce Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-1975*, Vol. 3 (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 26.

<sup>59</sup>J. B. Neilands, *Harvest of Death: Chemical Warfare in Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York: Free Press, 1971; 1972), 119.

<sup>60</sup>Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1989), 69.

<sup>61</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 539.

<sup>62</sup>Maitland and S. Weiss, *The Vietnam Experience: Raising the Stakes*, 146.

<sup>63</sup>Clancy, Stiner and Koltz, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces*, 172.



troops to follow safe routes through Cambodia and Laos in RVN. What one must remember is the geopolitical situation that existed at this period in history. The chief enemy of the US was the USSR, which was supporting DRV with advisors, supplies and arms.<sup>64</sup> DRV were also being supplied by China. While both of the aforementioned countries had not committed serious numbers of ground troops, the US could not risk inciting further Soviet or Chinese involvement in the war. The United Nations force that had fought in Korea had taught many of the Western nations of the folly of invading Asian countries where their presence was not welcomed. Large scale US forays into Laos, Cambodia or China in an effort to pursue DRV supply lines would most likely have incited further involvement by both the USSR and China. This was a situation that the US wished to avoid at all costs.<sup>65</sup>

US forces tried many other irregular strategies and programs to turn the war in their favor. One of these was the Phoenix Program that was designed to first identify and then either capture or kill VC leaders in RVN. These leaders were all intertwined and relied on each other. It was believed that if enough VC leaders were eliminated in the south then their ability to continue attacks would be compromised. Phoenix was headed by the CIA and its missions were conducted by US Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) special operators.<sup>66</sup> The program was first referred to as the Counter-Terror Program and morphed into Phoenix.<sup>67</sup> It began mostly as an assassination program targeted at simply identifying and killing VC leaders without attempting to glean any further useful intelligence. It was quickly realized that if the effectiveness of the program was to

---

<sup>64</sup>Marshall L. Michel, *The Eleven Days of Christmas: America's Last Vietnam Battle* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001), 16.

<sup>65</sup>McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, 149.

<sup>66</sup>M. J. Walsh, "Men with Green Faces," *Vietnam* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Aug 1996).

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

be maximized, then capturing the VC leaders alive was paramount. If taken alive they could then be properly interrogated using physical and psychological methods.

The SEALs used many different tactics from espionage to ambushes in order to gather information. They would dress like the locals in an attempt to remain inconspicuous. These types of methods yielded much better results than if they would have simply done “search and destroy” operations with large units. These operations mainly took place in the Mekong Delta in RVN near the city of Saigon. The SEALs who conducted these operations gained a fearsome reputation with the VC and were referred to as the “men with green faces.”<sup>68</sup> The SEALs managed to kill or capture many leaders, including the equivalent of a pair of two-star generals. After the war, the VC admitted that Phoenix had seriously undermined their efforts in RVN.<sup>69</sup> It was the ability of those running Phoenix to identify the problem they faced that allowed them so much success. Once they had identified the various VC threats then they could tailor their strategy and tactics to eliminate that threat in an efficient manner.

As the ground effort in Vietnam was mainly an Army concern, the characteristic in-fighting of US commanders in Vietnam limited the scope at which Phoenix could succeed. The US Navy allowed no more than 350 SEALs of six platoons in Vietnam at one time.<sup>70</sup> To further complicate things the Navy stated that any one SEAL could not remain in Vietnam for more than 180 days in order to avoid burn-out. This meant that precious links that individuals had with locals were severed every time they transferred out. It also meant that new people kept coming to the program who may have not had as much knowledge and experience in this type of

---

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>J. M. Gates, "People's War in Vietnam," *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 54 (1990), 337.

<sup>70</sup>Walsh, *Men with Green Faces*.

operations. There were also many concerns about the legality and morality of Phoenix.<sup>71</sup> These constrictions on the program and lack of resources hampered its effectiveness and ensured that it would make little effect on the final outcome of the war. The evidence also suggests that little effort was made to operationalize Phoenix and to synch it with other military service activities.

The US Marine Corps (USMC) too realized the importance of identifying who was a communist and who was merely a peasant. The major problem with fighting the communist guerillas was the fact that they often disguised themselves as local peasants or retreated to safety as US sweeps came. The US needed to adapt to the style of warfare they were fighting from conventional to counterinsurgency. Colonel Robert B. Rigg, a Vietnam veteran, summed up the frustration of fighting an unconventional enemy as follows:

“Glistening modern missiles contrast starkly with a sniper aiming a home-made rifle. Sophisticated electronics “bleep bleep” on consoles and the visual yellow-green-blue of radar constantly screens the sky. But none of these modern devices can tell you the political coloring of a peasant who may have just hidden a weapon.”<sup>72</sup>

The USMC had extensive experience in counterinsurgency warfare; much of it gained from its use as a limited means to quell disturbances.<sup>73</sup> The problem was that each different arm of the military had different amounts of influence and control over which strategies were implemented. The Marines’ idea was to mount small-unit patrols, set up ambushes and generally fight the communist guerillas with methods that had been proven earlier. “Intense patrol activity became the hallmark of USMC counter-guerilla operations.”<sup>74</sup> The Marines went so far as to establish CAPs for defence of small areas. These CAPs consisted of a

---

<sup>71</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 602.

<sup>72</sup>Rigg, *How to Stay Alive in Vietnam: Combat Survival in the War of Many Fronts*, 48-49.

<sup>73</sup>Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 24.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

few Marines being placed with groups of local villagers to supplement manpower. The idea was that the Marines would provide leadership, create positive US-Vietnamese relationships and get to know and understand the local people. Getting to know the locals would be useful for recognizing VC members when they tried to use the hamlets for supplies and rest. The CAPs were successful but communist forces consciously targeted Marines in the platoons causing significant casualties. Even though these tactics showed early success, USMC units were eventually rounded up by military leaders in order to conduct large-scale operations such as the reinforcement of Khe Sanh.<sup>75</sup> Once again, US inability to adapt and to capitalize on successful programs hamstrung a potentially valuable strategy.

The US failed at their attempts to contain the communist forces in Vietnam. From early in the conflict, it was clear that the Vietnam War was not to be a conventional one. Even the soldiers on the ground appreciated that fact: “Prime point: expect an ambush anywhere because the VC do not go by the conventional tactical “book”.”<sup>76</sup> Even so, US military leaders failed to appreciate the threat for what it really was. They had been trained to fight conventional war and could not adapt their style of warfare to the style of the Viet Minh, VC and NVA. If the US military had reinforced and resourced promising counterinsurgency programs and adapted their operational planning away from conventional tenets they may have achieved greater impact. Instead the US relied on superior firepower and concentration in an attempt to beat DRV by purely conventional means.

Lacking the clear understanding of the threat faced, the US forces in Vietnam were inevitably defeated. “Because Americans believed their military was invincible, they were less psychologically prepared to deal with the losses and setbacks of the Vietnam War than the

---

<sup>75</sup>Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, 140.

<sup>76</sup>Rigg, *How to Stay Alive in Vietnam: Combat Survival in the War of Many Fronts*, 63.

Vietnamese were.”<sup>77</sup> As the communist forces upped their efforts from merely guerilla activities to maneuver warfare, the US had lost the support for the war and were called home.<sup>78</sup> A traditional US reliance on large unit action and superior firepower had failed. If US forces would have capitalized on such resources as the extensive counterinsurgency knowledge of the USMC, they may have had more of an impact. Regardless, US commanders’ lack of foresight and flexibility led to their defeat.

Noted military author Tom Clancy stated that “before they left, US Army tactical forces had performed superbly. They were victorious in every tactical engagement, some at considerable cost in soldiers, and technical and tactical innovations.”<sup>79</sup> Regardless of the victories and sacrifices made by soldiers, the decision was made by US President Richard Nixon to remove all US forces from Vietnam. This was made official by the signing of the Paris negotiations on 27 January 1973.<sup>80</sup> As the US pulled their forces out, DRV began to attack southward. Without the support of US forces it was simply a matter of time before the NVA pushed its way south eventually capturing Saigon in 1975 and effectively uniting the country as communist Vietnam.

The US developed and employed numerous operational programs that achieved limited success. However, the US military failed to seize the opportunity provided by those successful programs. The greatest challenge in not being able to translate operational programs into sustained operational success was the US inability to synchronize the initiatives with the overall theatre plan. The most egregious failure committed by the US military was an inability to adapt

---

<sup>77</sup>King, *Let the Tigers Fight*.

<sup>78</sup>Gates, *People's War in Vietnam*, 329.

<sup>79</sup>Tom Clancy and Fred Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: Putnam, 1997), 84.

<sup>80</sup>S. G. Walker, "The Interface between Beliefs and Behavior," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1977, 1977), 129.

the style of warfare. The US had brought all of its experience and baggage from the World Wars and Korea, to Vietnam. The US military had been trained to fight large-scale conventional battles using large formations. The US military leadership insisted on concentrating its forces and to move units at battalion and division level. US forces relied solely on technology and firepower to win the war, instead of capitalizing on various successful operational methods that had emerged. While attempts were made to change various strategies and tactics, through the use of “hearts and minds” and small unit programs, many of these programs were hampered or blocked by an inability for the organization to change. In the end, body count was the principal MOE by which US forces measured success. If irregular tactics and strategies had been more utilized, and sustained, then the US could have been better satisfied in real strategic objectives and perhaps even have won the war.

## Bibliography

- Armbruster, Frank E., Thomas F. Bartman, Carolyn Kelley, and Hudson Institute. *Can we Win in Vietnam?*. Hudson Institute Series on National Security and International Order. Vol. 2. New York: Praeger, 1968.
- Asprey, Robert B. *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*. Authors Guild backinprintcom ed. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Inc., 2002.
- Bergen, John D. *Military Communications: A Test for Technology*. United States Army in Vietnam. Vol. 91-12. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1986.
- Brush, P. "The Withdrawal from Khe Sanh." *Vietnam* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Aug 1997).
- Cable, Larry E. *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*. New York: New York University Press, 1986.
- Chandler, Robert W. *War of Ideas: The U.S. Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981.
- Clancy, Tom and Fred Franks. *Into the Storm: A Study in Command*. New York: Putnam, 1997.
- Clancy, Tom, Carl Stiner, and Tony Koltz. *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.
- Clodfelter, Mark. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*. New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1989.
- Conboy, K. and J. Morrison. "Early Covert Action on the Ho Chi Minh Trail." *Vietnam* Vol. 13, No. 2 (Aug 2000).
- Daddis, Gregory A. *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*. Oxford: New York : Oxford University Press, 2014.
- DeFronzo, James. *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011.
- Dixon, P. "'Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Jun 2009): 353.
- Frankum, Ronald Bruce. *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-1975*. Vietnam--America in the War Years. Vol. 3. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- Gates, J. M. "People's War in Vietnam." *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 54, (1990).

- Hennessey, Michael A. *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*. Praeger Studies in Diplomacy and Strategic Thought. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam, a History*. New York: Viking Press, 1983.
- King, B. "Let the Tigers Fight." *Vietnam* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Oct 1999).
- Kolko, G. *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*. New York: The New York Press, 1985.
- Maitland, T. and S. Weiss. *The Vietnam Experience: Raising the Stakes*. Boston: Boston Publishing Co., 1982.
- Malkasian, C. "Toward a Better Understanding of Attrition: The Korean and Vietnam Wars." *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 68, No. 3 (Jul 2004): 911.
- Mason, Robert. *Chickenhawk*. New York: Viking Press, 1983.
- McGovern, George S., William C. Westmoreland, Edward Luttwak, Thomas J. McCormick, and Patrick J. Hearden. *Vietnam: Four American Perspectives : Lectures*. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1995.
- McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*. 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Melshen, P. "Mapping Out a Counterinsurgency Campaign Plan: Critical Considerations in Counterinsurgency Campaigning." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* Vol. 18, No. 4 (07 Dec 2007): 665.
- Michel, Marshall L. *The Eleven Days of Christmas: America's Last Vietnam Battle*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001.
- Nagl, J. A. "Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: British and American Army Counterinsurgency Learning during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War." *World Affairs* Vol. 161, No. 4 (Spring 1999): 193.
- Neilands, J. B. *Harvest of Death: Chemical Warfare in Vietnam and Cambodia*. New York: Free Press, 1971; 1972.
- O'Ballance, Edgar. *The Wars in Vietnam, 1954-1973*. New York: Hippocrene, 1975.
- Paret, Peter, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert. *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986.



- Rigg, Robert B. *How to Stay Alive in Vietnam: Combat Survival in the War of Many Fronts*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1966.
- Sharp, Ulysses S. Grant. *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*. San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978.
- Summers, Harry G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1984.
- Walker, S. G. "The Interface between Beliefs and Behavior." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1977): 129.
- Walsh, M. J. "Men with Green Faces." *Vietnam* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Aug 1996).
- Willenson, Kim. *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War*. A Newsweek Book. New York, N.Y. ; Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library, 1987.