

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
"Keeping the memories alive" Newsletter 264

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U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM--FROM BEGINNING TO END

- with Emphasis of the Role of Air Power

By Richard W. Buickerood

Chapter One Back to the Beginning

Before studying the United States' (U.S.) involvement in Vietnam (with emphasis on the use of air power), readers must realize fighting has been going on and off in Southeast Asia (SEA) for almost 22 centuries. Practically from the beginning of their recorded history the Vietnamese people have had internal and external conflicts, first with China, then France, the Japanese, the French again, and finally the Communists and the United States, along with some of our allies.

But why even study the U.S. experience in Vietnam? Who really cares? It's just a little third rate, economically backward country, thousands of miles from the United States. The answer is simple. One, the study is relevant because our political, economic, and military involvement deeply affected our society and most of our younger generations know little about it. Two, because a study of our misuse of armed military forces in a political and military environment our civilian leadership never understood is illuminating. And three, because I think you should hear about it from someone who fought in the combat there.

There is no easy way to study this very complex subject. Many historians say, for instance, that militarily we "won" all the battles, yet we lost the war. Why? We also know there are many myths, half-truths, and no-truths surrounding this conflict. Whenever this subject is discussed emotions run high in the media, the military, the government, and in various

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political, racial, and social special interest groups. But for this abridged history I'll try to keep the subject uncomplicated and objective--as free from my own emotions and bias' as possible.

Chapter One



First, we'll take a look back in time, at the country, its origins, its people, and its many early conflicts.

Vietnam, the Land

Vietnam is part of the Indochinese Peninsula which extends south from Asia into the South China Sea. In size it's about as long as Texas is wide, and the distance between the two major cities (Hanoi and Saigon) is about the same as the distance from Dallas to El Paso.

As the name Indo-china suggests, it lies between two ancient civilizations, those of India and China. While an Indian-inspired culture once flourished in central Vietnam, China influenced the country more throughout its history.

The Vietnamese people gained control of their current-day land after migrating from South China. First they took the northern area known as "Tonkin" in 450 B.C., then central "Annam" in the 15th century, and finally, in the 19th Century, they took "Cochin China" in the South from Cambodia.

The country's two major river deltas, the Red River in the North, and the Mekong River in the South, are the agricultural (primarily rice) breadbaskets of the nation.

The Vietnamese call the Red River, which flows southeasterly through Hanoi and then Haiphong into the South China Sea, the "Mother River," so rich is its soil. Yet it barely meets the needs of the people, as there are about 1600 to 2000 people per square mile there. This is almost twice the density of Rhode Island which is our most dense state. Unfortunately, the Red River can

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rage and flood as high as 30' above the level of Hanoi's streets--making the dikes and canals around the city vital to the city's survival.

The Mekong River on the other hand, flows much more gently, about 2500 miles southeastward from mountain ranges of Tibet, down the border between Laos and North Vietnam (NVN), then through Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Saigon into the South China Sea. More kind than the Red, its delta and rice basket are much richer, and flooding is not a problem. Thus there is no need for a system of protective dikes in the South.

Vietnam, the People

Mythical tales date ancient kingdoms as far back as 3000 B.C., but we don't know much of these times or these people. In 208 B.C. the kingdom of "Nam Viet" covered much of Southern China. Ruled from near present day Canton, it extended as far south as the coastal city of Da Nang. The early principle inhabitants of this area of Asia were the "Viets," a non-Chinese people of Mongolian descent. As these people moved south, they mingled with people racially akin to Indonesians and Filipinos, creating today's basic race.

In addition to the Viets, thirty-three different mountain tribes are scattered throughout the high mountain country, primarily in the central Annam region.

The language became a mix of Cambodian, Thai, and Chinese, and remains one of the world's most complex. This language "barrier" created major problems during most of Vietnam's conflicts, since most non-Asians found it nearly impossible to master.

Vietnam and China

In 111 B.C., China conquered Nam Viet and began a 1000 year rule of Vietnam.

During this period, no single person influenced Chinese or Vietnamese thought or institutions more than the philosopher, Confucius.

He taught the state, as a direct extension of the family, should be governed accordingly. He

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said the emperor was the father, he must protect his people and uphold rigid moral values. The emperor should expect the complete obedience and reverence of the people, but when he erred, heaven would show its displeasure with famine or flood, etc., and this could justify violent behavior by the people to replace him. Thus, as early as Confucius' day, it was a normal practice and custom for the people to overthrow the government and leadership, rather than using what we westerners call the democratic (voting) process.

Imperial officials, called "the parents of the people" or "mandarins," passed difficult tests to enter the bureaucracy. They also had to prove them-selves worthy of guiding the moral welfare of the people.

While the Vietnamese people tried to cling unofficially to their native tongue, Chinese was the official language for administration, education, and literature, until replaced by French centuries later.

Chinese methods generally improved overall economic prosperity, but the peasants who did most of the work saw little improvement in their day-to-day existence. And the peasants attitudes and behavior were to be a key ingredient in every major struggle throughout Vietnam's history.

The Trung Uprising in 39 A.D. was the first Vietnamese rebellion for national independence! The Trung sisters led the uprising, highlighting a far more important role for women in Vietnam than in most other parts of Asia.

UPDATE: The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) successfully used the popularity of the Trung sisters, who were native northerners, as a propaganda tool to recruit women into their forces.

China responded harshly to the uprising. They immediately began a program of totally integrating the Vietnamese people into Chinese society.

In 545 A.D. a Chinese aristocrat and scholar named Ly Bon, introduced the Vietnamese to guerilla or small force warfare, and used its tenets to defeat the far superior Chinese force. He then declared Vietnam independent from China. While The Chinese quickly retook the country,

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the North Vietnamese never forgot the lessons taught by Ly Bon.

Buddhism was the second major Chinese religion introduced into Vietnam. Buddhist missionaries and monks (called Bonzes) had a greater effect on the peasants than Confucianism because Buddhism was far less intellectual. Buddhism became a powerful political force as the monks became advisors to the ruling aristocrats.

In 938 A. D. the famous battle of Bach Dang took place near present day Haiphong. This battle is as famous in Vietnamese history as the Battles of Concord and Lexington are in United States' history, since the Vietnamese finally ended total Chinese domination.

NOTE: the Vietnamese guerilla forces used the high tides of the Red River to their advantage. By hiding spikes in the river bed they were able to impale the attacking ships when the tidal waters receded.

The Building of a Nation

For 500 years after the famous Bach Dang battle, six different dynasties tried to govern the country. Two distinct patterns emerge from this period:

One: governments which lost peasant support were inevitably overturned by insurrection and widespread social unrest, and

Two: rebellion and revolution continued to be a common and accepted instrument of political and social change for the Vietnamese.

Editorial Note: it makes me wonder if the situation today isn't just another phase in the constantly repeating Vietnamese history of conquest and peasant revolts.

During this 500 year period serious foreign threats (primarily European) continued to exist, and as a result, the Vietnamese began stressing national unity as the key to preserving their nationhood and independence.

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UPDATE: it was under this banner that the North Vietnamese justified their National War of Liberation with the South Vietnamese.

In 1407 China reconquered Vietnam. Economic exploitation accompanied ruthless measures to erase completely the Vietnamese culture and history.

In the second decade of the 15th Century, a wealthy landowner named Le Loi formed a guerilla force using elephants as transportation and as weapons. He soon controlled the night and the countryside, as the communists did against the French and the United States hundreds of years later. Le Loi drove the Chinese out again, and established a dynasty which lasted until 1804.

Editorial Note: obviously the Vietnamese people have practiced guerilla warfare for centuries, starting well before anyone discovered our country.

While seeking peace with China, the Vietnamese people began their expansion to the south. From the 11th to the 15th centuries they systematically displaced the Cham people from the Central region in and around Hue.

UPDATE: Today the minority Chams are still the subject of racial hatred and cultural prejudice within Vietnam; as are the racially mixed children left behind after the withdrawal of U.S. and other troops in 1972.

For the Vietnamese, conquering the Chams was only the beginning of an aggressive expansionist policy towards their neighbors. In their untiring struggle to expand their territory, the Vietnamese assumed a sense of national destiny--a desire to be the dominant country on the Indochina peninsula. The Vietnamese call this history of winning land the "slow munching of silk worms."

UPDATE: this is one of the primary reasons the North Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1975/1976 and drove out the ruthless communist group called the Khmer Rouge.

Le Loi and later emperors emphasized the family as the core of society but tried to maintain control over its influence.

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Editorial Note: even today, however, the Vietnamese peoples' family obligations are stronger than those to the central government. The North Vietnamese communists considered this attitude to be counter-revolutionary during their successful campaign to invade and dominate the South. So it will be interesting to see how much longer the present regime can keep the peasant families/bonds under their control.

In the 1500's two Vietnamese families split the country at the 17th Parallel. The Trinh family controlled the North, while the Nguyen family ruled the South Central regions. The Nguyens continued their expansion southward, and eventually took the Mekong delta region from the Khmer kings of Cambodia.

During this period the peasants in the South had larger plots of land than ever before, and just as important, they owned it.

The Vietnamese language finally became the primary language instead of Chinese, and the Vietnamese repressed the Champa and Khmer (or Cambodian) cultures.

The 16th and 17th centuries saw European powers try to get a foothold in this part of the world. But Vietnam proved to be a poor trading partner because under Confucianism there was no middle class. The governing mandarins and the peasants considered merchants or middleman people who just profited from others without producing anything. Even today there is no real middle class, the rulers and the peasants divide the society.

Editorial Note: interestingly, Japan and other strong Asian nations today feel the U.S. has almost the same image--a producer of financial paper rather than products which serve the needs of the people.

While the Europeans (primarily England, France, and the Dutch) failed in their trade attempts, they did leave behind Catholic missionaries. In 1615 the French built a mission in the Red River delta of the north. From this event we see the beginning of French influence in the area; thousands became Catholics.

UPDATE: In modern times the Catholics became another major political force within the

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country, particularly in relation to the governments of the South.

The French returned to Vietnam in strength in the 1770's--desperate to get a foothold in the region to counter British domination which then existed in both India and China. By 1802 they helped a Nguyen descendent, named Nguyen An, unite Vietnam for the first time, from the Gulf of Thailand in the South to the Chinese border in the North.

The French Conquest

Nguyen An moved his capital from Hanoi to Hue, changed his name to G.A. Long, named his kingdom Vietnam, and founded the last Vietnamese dynasty which existed until 1955.

G.A. Long built magnificent temples and palaces at Hue, but land reforms he and his successors started did not solve the peasants' ills. By 1845 the Nguyen dynasty seized more Laotian land along the Mekong, and divided control of Cambodia with Thailand.

UPDATE: these boundaries closely approximate those we found when we became involved in the region.

In 1859, the French used military force to seize Saigon, and in 1873 they also seized Hanoi.. Vietnam asked the United States government for help. But we gave no help because the French voluntarily pulled out of Hanoi.

In 1883 France took Hanoi again--this time permanently. Again the Vietnamese asked the U.S. to mediate, but the French, as a major world power, refused to accept us as mediators. And so began a century of French Colonial Governors ruling over Vietnam.

Colonial Rule

French rule showed imperialism at its worst. They imposed their standards and values upon Vietnam's traditional society. The French found Vietnam a country of landowning peasants, they left it 70 years later as a country of landless peasants. The French felt they had achieved the highest form of civilization and it was only natural to transfer that society to the

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Vietnamese.

Editorial Note: this last view of the French sounds very much like the liberal idealism espoused by the young Ivy League college graduates hired by the Kennedy Administration in the 1960s. That is, these young idealists felt we should export our form of democratic government to every other less fortunate country on the globe who needed our help economically, politically, or militarily.

Under French domination Vietnam became a colonial bureaucrat's dream creating vast fortunes and estates for themselves and a few rich Vietnamese, while exploiting the people and the resources of Vietnam. Little was done to industrialize the country, but France did build an extensive canal system in the South which helped increase agricultural yields.

UPDATE: rice production in the South continued to grow, causing the Japanese and the North Vietnamese to covet its production later during the 20th Century.

French monopolies also developed and controlled the native rubber and coal industries, as well as opium and alcohol production. Opium had always been outlawed within the Vietnamese culture, and alcohol was a source of private income for the peasants since it was a part of many religious festivals/ceremonies. Now all that changed, and it added further disaster to the peasants' economic status.

The French closed schools and forced their own language on the people. By also insisting on a Western form of judicial law, they served to force the peasants to give up their lands because of jail terms or heavy tax burdens. They thus broke down small landholding and concentrated the wealth in the hands of a few. The French turned the peasantry into a class of paupers and undermined the village governments. Eventually only those who could take advantage of their own power became government officials and they, with the French, put the squeeze on the people.

The Resistance

The Vietnamese continued to practice guerilla warfare with thirteen major uprisings against the

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French between 1885 and 1945.

An anti-colonial movement was growing within the new class of middle-men who understood, and knew how to manipulate, the French system for the welfare of the peasants. These were the religious sects: The Cao Dai in southern Vietnam, and the reformed Catholics in the central and northern regions.

Cao Dai--was a synthesis of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. It became very popular with the peasants in the countryside, because by placing believers inside the government, it helped the people deal with the French administration. In 1938 the sect formed a private army to protect its true believers.

Catholics like the Cao Dai, the Catholic priests were able to provide peasants with trustworthy access to political and economic power.

These two mass organizations provided a valuable part of a credible resistance movement and were in place in 1924 when the Soviets sent Ho Chi Minh to the area to organize a communist association in Vietnam. In 1930, under direct guidance from Moscow, Ho formed the Indochinese Communist Party with primarily North Vietnamese leadership.

Out of the nationalist and revolutionary movements erupting in Vietnam in the first half of the 20th Century emerged two men who would grow to symbolize their country's division: Ho Chi Minh ("**he who enlightens**"), and Ngo Dinh Diem. Born Nguyen Tat Thanh, as a young man Ho studied in Paris and Moscow, and with Soviet help eventually founded the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietminh. Diem was from a rich Catholic family and used his government connections to become a public servant.

In 1930 the first battles between the French and the Communists took place. Although the Vietnamese successfully used guerilla tactics, a famine finally led to their defeat, for as with any guerilla movement they needed to live off the land as well as gaining the support of the people.

The Fall of France

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When France fell to the Nazis, the Vietnamese Communists thought their time to take control of Vietnam was at hand. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the military mastermind of the modern day Communist guerilla strategy, joined Ho, as did Pham Van Dong, later to become premier of North Vietnam.

At barely 5' tall, Giap had a "runt or Napoleon complex" and a ruthless disregard for casualties among his soldiers. Because of his volatile temperament he was called the "Volcano under the Snow." In addition to being Commander-in-Chief of the NVA, Giap was also a Deputy Premier in the North Vietnamese government, a member of their Politburo, and the Minister of Defense.

Thus most of the NVN power and decision-making was concentrated in three men--Ho, Giap, and Dong--who served together for decades. Compare that to the ever changing and conflicting list of persons leading our government and our military services during this conflict.

By mid-1941 Japan seized control of Vietnam from the French, although they allowed the French to administer it while the Japanese took the rice and other natural resources for their armed forces. The Japanese exploited groups like the Cao Dai, which believed in "Asia for the Asians." The groups became powerful forces against France and the Communists.

The Communists remained safely in China for most of this turbulent period. But by May 1941 Ho Chi Minh led them back into Vietnam, their goal being to organize all Vietnamese into an anti-colonial/anti-French force. To do this they formed a new organization called the "Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh"--soon known around the world as the "Vietminh."

This group included all segments of the population, as they cleverly determined you did not have to be a Communist to be a part of this anti-colonial "independence" movement. The organization encompassed all levels of society and government, as well as establishing guerilla bases on Vietnamese soil. By late 1941 their camps were turning out forty trained fighters every ten days.

Also by late 1941 the United States became concerned about its vital Indochinese rubber sources being cutoff because the Japanese occupied the region. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to force their hand by effectively cutting off their long-term oil supplies, Japan

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used that act as a basis for their invasion of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7th, 1941.

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), used Ho, Phan Van Dong, and the Vietminh in China to spy against the Japanese. The Communists used this fact to bolster their image and gain total control of the Vietnamese independence effort.

In 1944 U.S. Army Air Corps bombers stationed in the Philippines bombed Japanese strongholds in Saigon and Da Nang. But the Japanese still retained enough strength to take over control of the French Administration in March 1945. They then tried to play the role of liberator by turning the country back over to Emperor Bao Dai--a puppet of the French who was now a puppet of the Japanese.

In April 1945 the Vietminh began to plan for liberation from the Japanese, and placed the Vietnam Liberation Army under the control of General Giap. Meanwhile the OSS continued to work with the Vietminh to gather intelligence about the Japanese.

As WW II drew to a close the Allies had a major political battle over control of Indochina. Britain supported French claims in the region, while the United States wanted France totally out of Indochina. At Potsdam in 1946 negotiators agreed to divide Indochina at the 16th parallel, with British forces controlling territory south of the line, and Chinese north of it.

But the Vietminh acted first and independently of the Potsdam meetings. They accepted the Japanese surrender and with it huge quantities of arms. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh addressed a crowd in Hanoi, and quoting freely from the United States Constitution declared Vietnam independent.

Editorial Note: while Ho had help from Archimedes Patti, an American OSS officer, in writing these famous remarks, he also had a keen sense of history and used it wisely. When foreign leaders with whom we disagree throw our own Constitution and Declaration of Independence back at us, we have a hard time countering their public rhetoric.

France waited in the wings, waiting to take back its "jewel of the empire."

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France Returns

On 23 September 1945 France attacked Saigon in a battle against the Vietminh. In an attempt at compromise, Ho allowed the French to replace the Chinese as the occupation force in the North in exchange for France's recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state.

Indochina War I begins: in 1946 France took Haiphong by force, and guerilla warfare by the Vietminh against the French started again.

With the fall of mainland China to the Communists, General Giap became confident he could go on the offensive. By October 1950 Giap had driven the French out of northern North Vietnam and into country's far western regions bordering Laos.

When the French Air Force introduced napalm in December 1950 they caused some significant setbacks, so Giap then reverted to large scale attacks only when he could win.

In 1954 the French decided to make a stand at Dien Bien Phu in western North Vietnam, in hope Giap would throw his army against them and be destroyed. Instead, Giap's army dug artillery pieces through the jungle, surrounded the out-gunned French, and forced them to unconditionally surrender on May 7th, 1954.

A Divided Nation

The "peace talks" were called the 1954 Geneva Accords. The negotiators again arbitrarily split the country, this time at the 17th parallel. The Vietminh regrouped in the North while the United States allied itself with South Vietnam.

Under the terms of the Accords the Vietnamese people could migrate to the region of their choice, so about 1,000,000 people fled the North and about 100,000 Vietminh communist troops left the South. But in direct violation of the Accords several thousand of Giap's soldiers remained in the South as cadre for future action. They became the Viet Cong (VC or "Charlie").

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In 1950, under threats against his life from the Vietminh, Diem fled Vietnam and lived in the United States for two years. There he became very close to then-Senator John F. Kennedy (JFK). He returned in 1953 as Emperor Bao Dai's Prime Minister.

In 1954, after the French defeat and the Geneva Accords, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to contain communist expansion in the region. Unlike NATO however, SEATO called for no definite commitment of forces. We used in the 1960s to help legally justify U.S. actions in South Vietnam. An ineffective organization, it disbanded in 1977.

The Geneva Accords also called for free elections to determine the fate of the country. The elections never took place in either the North or the South. Ho Chi Minh remained the absolute ruler in the North, while Ngo Dinh Diem used a national referendum in the South to make himself President of the New Republic of Vietnam (RVN), dethroning Bao Dai. After receiving an unusually high percentage of votes, about 95 per cent, Diem refused to hold the national reunification elections required by the Geneva Accords. Among his many personal fears, he feared Ho would win and make the country communist.

Unlike the North where Ho and Dong controlled the government and the people, and General Giap controlled one army, Diem in the South faced massive problems immediately. He was cursed with many private armies and gangster groups: The Cao Dai army; the Hao Hao Buddhist army; and the Binh Xuyen, a secret society who controlled gambling, opium, and prostitution--as well as the Saigon police. Using U.S. aid money and the influence of his family, Diem tried to buy the loyalty of these groups. The Binh Xuyen and others refused, and many fled into the Mekong delta's swamps. Diem used his army against the sect's armies and drove them out--where many joined the Vietminh, later the Viet Cong. The Hoa Hoa sect did not support Diem, but they worked with the CIA to fight the VC in the Mekong Delta region of IV Corps.

Diem got good marks from the people and the U.S. government early on, but over the long term did not adequately and ethically reform his government. Many U.S. political and military leaders grew quickly disillusioned with Diem, and doubted if he could ever effectively lead his

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country.

The South Vietnamese people continued to have a lack of trust in a central government due to its corruption and nepotism. Diem started land reforms for the peasants, but alienated most of them since a few rich or family connected Vietnamese continued to control most of the land.

In 1956 South Vietnam created a new constitution, but Diem, his three brothers, and the rest of his immediate family just used it to increase their own power. Diem's poor handling of the country's economy and security eventually led to his downfall, and directly gave rise to the strong communist movement in the south.

Diem's move against the remnants of the Vietminh left in the south had been about 90% successful by 1956. Groups survived however, and became the nucleus of the National Liberation Front (NLF), later labeled by Diem's media as the "Viet Cong."

General Giap officially started guerilla warfare in South Vietnam against Diem in 1957. His military leaders infiltrated into the south did extensive recruiting from all the dissident groups driven out of favor by Diem, as well as finding a sympathetic ear from many of the peasants who remained disillusioned by the failings of a central government. (A "People's War")

Note: the communist guerrillas modified ancient guerilla tactics to allow them to go on the offensive to gain political power, rather than fighting a defensive action against an invading force.

Two Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) advisors sent into Vietnam by President Eisenhower to help with the pacification program were killed by a bomb in their Saigon quarters in 1959 (first U.S. casualties in the modern Vietnam era).

While Diem's South Vietnamese Armed Forces (SVNAF) grew in strength with U.S. military aid and advisors, so did the Viet minh in the North and the Viet Cong cadres in the South. But the SVNAF needed a lot more time to develop as a viable fighting force than this war allowed. And Diem's overriding preoccupation with using U.S. dollars to protect himself from rivals, instead of using the dollars to help the people, continued to foster a credibility gap with the very

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people he was trying to win over.

Editorial Note: long standing cultural problems stood in the way of real SVNAF progress. For example, in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) many senior officers felt it was beneath them to participate in field exercises, and many senior officers were appointed because of their family ties rather than their military expertise.

NOTE: MACV defined pacification as "...the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's under-ground government, the assertion or reassertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion." Pacification was designed to :

- end the insurrection and restore peace,
- develop democracy on an American model,
- reform society to support a central government.

North Vietnam began using Laos and Cambodia as sanctuaries for the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" which the North used to funnel troops and enormous quantities of supplies into the South.

Note: the NVN began expanding this jungle network of roads and trails leading into South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia as early as 1959. Why was it expanded if not for invasion? It eventually became a 12,000 mile network of roads, some paved, as well as having over 3,000 miles of pipeline for petroleum products. Without this trail network the NVN would not have conquered the RVN.

Newly elected President Kennedy decided he would stand firm against Communism in South Vietnam. His Democratically controlled administration did not want to "lose" more of Asia to the Communists as they felt President Truman had done both in China and in Korea in the late 1940s/early 1950s. Kennedy promoted counterinsurgency efforts to counter Khrushchev's "Wars of National Liberation." Kennedy emphasized the US Army as his primary counterinsurgency force, and so established the "Green Berets." The USAF then set up a

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Special Air Warfare Center at Hurlburt Field, Florida.

At first President Kennedy and Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) asked Diem to break up the large land holdings and redistribute land to the poor, but the process failed.

In late 1962, following the advice of his personal military advisor, General Maxwell Taylor, and others, Kennedy sent United States Army (USA) helicopter companies to Vietnam, and permitted our ground advisors and pilots to enter into combat against the Viet Cong.

Captain John Paul Vann and other junior USA officers tried unsuccessfully to convince our leaders the war against the VC guerrillas was going poorly, and that Diem had no popular support in the "strategic hamlets" he was trying to build and to pacify for the peasants.

By January 1963 it was obvious the ARVN could not match up. Their senior military leaders were sending the inexperienced junior officers out in the field to do battle. Most looked more concerned with avoiding casualties than with defeating the enemy.

By May 1963 the situation was deteriorating rapidly. The pacification program was a shambles. And when Catholics flew their flag in the ancient capital of Hue, and Buddhists couldn't do the same, rioting began. Buddhist monks burned themselves in the streets in protest and Diem condemned them as Communists. By August 1963 Diem ordered his army to attack Buddhist pagodas in direct defiance of U.S. wishes.

The military leadership of the Republic of Vietnam then discussed with U.S. officials a possible coup against Diem. When the South Vietnamese Army decided to oust Diem, he escaped, but was murdered just three weeks before Kennedy's assassination.

Note: history is uncertain whether or not the U.S. was directly involved in the coup. A study of the circumstances, meetings, etc., could lead a reader to infer we, at least tacitly, agreed with the proposal.

By 1964 President Johnson had slowly built up our military and civilian advisory presence; but the Communists controlled about 40% of the country.

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As Communist military aggression escalated, political stability in South Vietnam appeared impossible, and our leadership determined only U.S. military strength could back up our political initiatives. Johnson began talking about retaliatory strikes against the North, but they took the initiative by attacking the American destroyer MADDOX outside the 12 mile territorial limit on 2 August 1964. The next day the TURNER JOY was also "attacked."

NOTE: there is much historical and factual uncertainty about the attack on the TURNER JOY. It is very likely that under the foggy and high seas conditions which prevailed, the "jumpy" US Navy gunners fired at each other rather than at attacking enemy gunboats. The situation appears to parallel closely the recent downing of an Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf.

On 11 August Johnson signed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which gave him the power to take any action he thought necessary. The role of the U.S. had changed---instead of just advising South Vietnam, the U.S. took charge of all forces fighting North Vietnam. UNFORTUNATELY, WE DID IT WITH NO DECLARATION OF WAR BY THE CONGRESS, AND NO CLEAR CUT NATIONAL GOALS OR POLICIES (Indochina War II begins).

Note: a formal Congressional declaration of war as defined in the Constitution would have forced the administration to define national objectives. It would also have placed some controls on the media, and set penalties for treason and giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

This chapter brings us to the point of our heaviest entry into the war in SEA. You should now have a historical perspective of the region and its thousands of years of fighting and turmoil. You should recognize how France abused the country as much as the Chinese. The reading also points out how Diem's ineffectiveness and personal ambition led to his own violent downfall; in total agreement with thousands of years of Vietnamese culture. As we go through our involvement in this war I wonder if the struggle of communist versus non-communist versus South Vietnamese government wasn't just another short chapter in the centuries old tradition of warfare, and wonder if the Communists will have any better luck than anyone else has had in controlling the peasants.

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Chapter Two



EARLY U.S. ACTIONS IN VIETNAM: 1964-1967

Gross Negligence!!!! That's how I could describe our government's conduct of the Vietnam War. Gross neglect of the Clausewitz's Principles of War, and a total lack of understanding of the history, culture, society, and traditions of SEA. We knew almost nothing about the country or its people! The early Presidents (Kennedy & LBJ) tried to wage war without the mobilization of the American people, and with no clearly defined political or military objectives.

One of the real tragedies of this war is that the U.S., at the height of its own liberal idealism, sought to create a liberal democracy in our image in a country which never had such a tradition or form of government; i.e., we thought we could reform the world!

After Kennedy got us involved militarily, LBJ's principle objective was to protect his Great Society public welfare programs and not arouse the public. A war the American people never understood shattered his liberal aspirations of progress and hope for the betterment of all racial and ethnic groups within our country. And, as a result, we lost a war politically which the military was capable of winning on the battlefield.

This chapter covers the 1964-1967 period. When you're through with it you should understand that militarily and politically we began to win the war in RVN during this period, but a series of military and social events were taking place which would rip our country apart in 1968.

We'll follow this outline, with primary emphasis on air operations rather than the more highly publicized ground operations. The events in all caps represent the phases the North Vietnamese were in, as opposed to those phases of warfare the U.S. leadership thought it was in. In retrospect, we were constantly reacting, rather than acting.

1. U.S.: The Advisory Years (1955-1964).

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NVA: SMALL GUERILLA ACTIONS (1957-60)

2. U.S.: End of Advisory Period (Nov 64-Apr 65)

NVA: SMALL CONVENTIONAL OPERATIONS (1960-64)

3. U.S. Direct Involvement (Apr-Jun 65)

NVA: LARGE-SCALE CONVENTIONAL WAR (1964-68)

4. U.S. Assumes Major Role (Jun-Sep 65)

5. USAF Deployments/Operations (Sep-Dec 65)

6. U.S. Centralized Control of Air Ops (Jan-Dec 66)

NVA: GENERAL OFFENSIVE (TET-1968)

NOTE: as we trace U.S. and USAF involvement I'll introduce in general terms what the NVA leadership was thinking and doing during this same period. Many of the incites into NVN thinking can be attributed to General Davidson's research.

THE ADVISORY YEARS (1955-64):

As we mentioned the Chapter One, the number of U.S. civilian and military personnel in SEA in general, and in RVN in particular, continued to grow during the years immediately after the signing of the 1954 Geneva Accords.

Kennedy had determined he would not be another Democratic President to be "defeated" in Asia as had Truman. He was also wary of fighting another large-scale land war on the Asian Continent (e.g., Korea), and was very concerned about the possible military reaction of China and the Soviet Union.

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By late 1961 the United States Air Force (USAF) set up several photo processing units to support USAF RF-101s flying reconnaissance missions in RVN and Laos.

In early 1962, MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), a subordinate command reporting directly to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), in Hawaii, replaced the MAAG.

By the Kennedy assassination in late 1963 there were about 1500 U.S. troops in RVN. These advisors, operating under the control of MACV were guided by three politico-military policies:

- Give counsel and advice, while providing equipment and training.
- Create a strong internal military force which will help lead to a stable government.
- Shape RVN's Armed Forces to meet a large-scale invasion from NVN.

While Kennedy felt counterinsurgency training was the key to stopping the internal subversion of the RVN, we were still wary of our recent conventional war experiences in Korea, so we were not totally focused on dealing with internal subversion. As a result, the USA was doing both counterinsurgency and conventional force training--which proved very confusing to both U.S. and RVN troops. Perhaps the SVNAF should have focused on counterinsurgency (winning the "hearts and minds" of their own people) and left the fighting for external security of the nation to the better trained, led, and equipped U.S. forces.

USAF advisors taught the fledgling Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) how to conduct close air support missions in support of their ground forces, as well as interdiction of enemy communications and supplies. To do these missions we supplied them with old, slow, propeller-driven aircraft. The USAF controlled most tactical airlift and reconnaissance.

"Ranch Hand" C-123 defoliation missions began in early 1962, and by 1964 they were defoliating Viet Cong crops and VC/NVA jungle sanctuaries all over the RVN. This defoliation campaign, which lasted until 1971, used various chemicals sprayed from primarily USAF aircraft. The most infamous chemical being Dioxin, commonly known as Agent Orange. It became an

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important part of the battles against the VC and the NVA in tunnels found all over the country, but primarily near Saigon.

USAF Forward Air Controllers (FACs), flying O-1 aircraft, arrived in 1963 and tried to teach the VNAF to perform visual reconnaissance and to direct air strikes against the Viet Cong.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--IN DECEMBER 1963 THE NINTH PLENUM OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY LEADERSHIP DECIDED TO EXPAND NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY SUPPORT OF THE WAR BEING FOUGHT IN THE SOUTH PRIMARILY BY THE VC--EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS NATURAL ANIMOSITY BETWEEN THE PEOPLES OF THE TWO REGIONS.

In March 1964, our government issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 228 which defined our objectives in Vietnam: "We seek an independent non-communist South Vietnam...South Vietnam must be free...Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under communist dominance...."

LBJ accepted President Eisenhower's "Domino Theory," and this NSAM was the justification for our in-country actions for the next five years.

By the end of 1964 we saw tremendous growth in the number of WWII propeller-driven airplanes like C-47s, B-26s, and T-28s introduced through U.S. grant programs into the VNAF (the Geneva Accords prohibited the introduction of jets into Vietnam). The VNAF expanded during this period, but suffered from lack of flying experience, limited managerial experience on the part of its leaders, and in its requirements to protect the RVN President by standing "coup alert" instead of destroying the Viet Cong.

END OF THE ADVISORY PERIOD (NOV 64-APR 65):

In 1964 the national elections against Barry Goldwater consumed LBJ, and as the "peace" candidate he resisted the advice of his civilian and military counselors to bomb NVN. LBJ knew most people in the U.S. didn't care or even know about Vietnam, it wasn't "front page news," and he wanted to keep it that way.

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The Viet Cong stepped up the action, however, by bombing USAF aircraft on Bien Hoa Air Base about 20 miles northeast of Saigon on 1 November 1964; and by wiping out two Vietnamese Ranger battalions, and one Vietnamese Marine company when the senior Vietnamese ground commander refused to approve their requests for air force support.

In the aftermath of these two disastrous events General Westmoreland, MACV Commander, decided to increase his emphasis on air power. Concurrent with this decision was another to use the USAF and US Navy fighters and bombers against targets in northern Laos to support the Royal Lao government. Code named "BARREL ROLL," these operations lasted from December 1964 to February 1973.

By the end of 1964 there were over 23,000 American troops in SEA, about 6,700 of them in the USAF.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--BY DECEMBER 1964, NORTH VIETNAMESE MAIN FORCE UNITS BEGAN TO ARRIVE IN STRENGTH IN THE SOUTH. THIS MOVE BY NVN CHANGED THE CONFLICT FROM A VIET CONG INSURRECTION INTO AN INVASION OF A SOVEREIGN NATION. IT CHANGED A GUERRILLA WAR INTO A LARGE UNIT CONVENTIONAL WAR, AND EXPANDED THE WAR INTO THE NORTH, LAOS, AND CAMBODIA. BASED ON LBJ'S "PEACEFUL" CAMPAIGN RHETORIC, THE NVN THOUGHT THEY COULD WIN THE WAR MILITARILY WITHOUT TOO MUCH U.S. INTERFERENCE.

The U.S. and RVN leaders continued fighting against, and training the SVNAF for, a "peoples' war"--trying to use an army and an air force to build a nation from the inside, instead of securing the country's external borders from infiltration first.

In February 1965 the Viet Cong attacked and inflicted heavy material and personnel casualties at our air base at Pleiku in the Central Highlands. LBJ felt he had to do something. Seeing Vietnam becoming a test of his political manhood, LBJ ordered immediate retaliatory airstrikes against NVN.

March 1965 saw two significant events. First, the U.S. started operation "ROLLING THUNDER" against selected targets in the North using USAF and United States Marine Corps (USMC)

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aircraft stationed in South Vietnam, and USN carriers in the South China Sea. Second, at General Westmoreland's request, two United States Marine Corps (USMC) Battalion Landing Teams went ashore to provide American security at Da Nang Air Base in I Corps. We now had a full U.S. ground combat unit on Asian territory.

BEGINNING OF DIRECT INVOLVEMENT (APR-JUN 1965):

Operation STEEL TIGER started in April 1964, with USAF and USN/USMC fighter and bomber aircraft interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Laotian panhandle down to the DMZ. Later the USAF used gunships like the AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130.

We saw almost immediate military and political criticism of Operation ROLLING THUNDER. The military objected to its half-hearted or "graduated" application of air power against a highly restricted and "from-the-top" controlled target list. The civilians advising LBJ complained about the campaign's inability to stop the flow of supplies from North to the South along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; even though they had recommended the operation as a low cost option, and as a psychological blow against the NVN leadership, rather than a decisive military campaign.

As our leaders debated the "hows" and "whys" of the campaign, the NVN ignored the so-called "psychological blow" and built up their extensive defenses, more formidable than any we have ever seen before or since. In April 1965 we experienced our first USAF and USN aircraft losses to NVN MIG aircraft and Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs). This defensive system eventually grew to some 8000 Anti-Aircraft (AAA) guns, about 200 SAM batteries, hundreds of fighters, and a very complex and sophisticated radar and command and control network.

During operation ROLLING THUNDER we created "Route Packages." We divided NVN into six geographic areas beginning at the so-called Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with Route Package One (also called the "Tally Ho" region).

NOTE: "So-called" DMZ because while we prohibited attacks into this zone the NVA moved in several divisions along with heavy artillery.

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The USAF and USN both flew airstrikes in Route Packages One through Five--each region moving progressively farther north.

Route Package Six was a special case, as it encompassed both the northern capital, Hanoi, and their major port, Haiphong. A major rail line from China to Hanoi practically split this region into two equal parts. The USAF, operating out of bases in Thailand, attacked targets primarily west of this rail line, while the USN operating off carriers attacked targets around Haiphong and east of the rail line. These air attacks created the famous geographic reference point "Thud Ridge" west of Hanoi, and coined the phrase "Going Downtown" in reference to air missions in the Hanoi vicinity.

NOTE: during the 40s and 50s and the military leadership abdicated its traditional role as the formulators of military strategy--into this gap stepped civilian theorists using operations analysis and economic-type modeling. The military created the doctrinal vacuum by our almost total reliance on the post WWII policy of nuclear "massive retaliation." The military leaders thought these were just "egghead" theories and disregarded them--until these academic analysts proposed the civilian strategy of gradualism--bomb targets, but make it cost effective; and don't let the military escalate the war in a desire to "win" it.

The liberal young "whiz kids" left over from the JFK administration wanted to send a signal to the North that the administration and the country was serious about the war.

UNFORTUNATELY, NVN GOT JUST THE OPPOSITE SIGNAL!! LBJ's Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Robert S. McNamara had superb analytic theories which were great for preparing for war but not for fighting it (analysts "...know a lot about cost but very little about value..."). In fact, with a no-front war like we faced in Vietnam, "winning" is almost impossible to precisely quantify. It wasn't like WW II with its clearly defined lines of good guys and bad guys. In Vietnam, the enemy was everywhere, and you couldn't easily tell friend from foe.

LBJ was later quoted as saying his greatest mistake was "...not to have fired, with the exception of Dean Rusk, the holdovers from the Kennedy administration... and not putting enough trust in my military advisors."

These increasing air missions also saw the beginning of a major problem in our conduct of the

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air war. That is, who controlled it, and how was it to be done? General Westmoreland felt as the senior military commander in Vietnam, he controlled it, and no one seemed capable of changing his view.

Note: the civilians and the Army felt the air war was complementary to the ground war, as in Korea. The USAF felt we proved in both WW II and Korea that centralized control of air assets by air force leaders was the only effective way to support the ground forces.

The USAF now faced the task of supporting the ground forces in a limited, conventional tactical war, while it had been preparing for a strategic nuclear war for two decades. Unfortunately, we had neither the airframes nor the munitions to support this tactical war and shortages became a problem. As did targeting--since McNamara and LBJ personally selected and approved all targets in the North at a Tuesday luncheon in the White House.

In April 1965 NSAM 328 permitted the USMC "...more active use..." and created U.S. "enclaves" around important coastal areas. American troops would defend these areas but not go more than 50 miles from them to help ARVN troops.

NOTE: enclave strategy had failed for French years earlier. Why did we think it would work for us?

U.S. ASSUMES MAJOR ROLE (JUN-SEP 1965):

In June 1965 the RVN government changes hands for the 9th time since Diem's assassination. In yet another coup, General Nguyen Van Thieu was elected Chairman and Chief of State, with Nguyen Cao Ky becoming Prime Minister. Four powerful generals ruled South Vietnam's four military regions:

I Corps (pronounced "eye core") encompassed the five most northern provinces,

II Corps covered the Central Highlands,

III Corps controlled the approaches to and the defense of the capital, Saigon, and

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IV Corps defended the Mekong River delta regions in the provinces south of Saigon.

Throughout 1965 the RVN ground forces took tremendous losses in Viet Cong attacks against district capitals, and it became obvious more USAF air power was needed. Eventually Westmoreland got B-52's over SAC's objections. Strategic Air Command (SAC) generals and some civilian leaders wanted to keep the B-52s in the U.S. as a key part of the country's strategic Triad defensive structure. But the more senior ranking Westmoreland carried the argument.

Massive B-52 "ARC LIGHT" blanket bombing sorties became a mainstay of Westmoreland's air strategy. The USAF flew these strikes from airbases in Guam, Okinawa, and Thailand, with each B-52 dropping upwards of 100, 750 pound bombs from 30,000 feet. During the war, the USAF lost 29 B-52s while flying over 126,000 sorties.

Westmoreland felt this major 1965 NVN/Viet Cong effort would either cut the country in two or would find the Viet Cong setting up their own government in the Central Highlands--so he also asked for more troops.

LBJ backed the request for two more USMC battalions and about 20,000 logistical troops. This increase, coupled with the usual intense debate within the administration, the Pentagon, and the Congress, showed rising concern in Washington about our involvement in a war.

The US Army and USMC thoroughly disliked the enclave strategy stipulated in NSAM 328, as it forced them to give up the all-important "OFFENSIVE." "Search and Destroy" operations rapidly replaced it as a ground strategy. Westmoreland wanted our better trained troops to seek out and destroy the large scale NVA units, while the ARVN dealt with the Viet Cong and worked on the fledgling Pacification program--i.e., working with their own people to gain support of the central government. Initially, our civilian leaders disagreed.

Hot debates followed concerning our ground strategy in RVN. The real question, however, was not what was the proper strategy, but rather what kind of war was the U.S. fighting at the time. We seemed to have our USA moving away from defeating the enemy and doing civic affairs,

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building schools, etc.

USAF DEPLOYMENTS/AIR OPERATIONS (SEP-DEC 65):

More fighters rotated in, and we introduced a new jet fighter aircraft, the F-5 Freedom Fighter into the USAF and the VNAF. In October, U.S. engineers and South Vietnamese laborers finished Cam Ranh Bay AB, a major airbase and deep water port in II Corps. The Republic of Korea's Ninth Infantry (White Horse) Division protected the base.

NOTE: beside the U.S., Korea was one of five countries providing combat troops. The others were Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Now, in addition to the worries of SAC commanders, Tactical Air Command (TAC) commanders worried about diverting too many tactical assets from their main focus of Europe and NATO. We also found we didn't have enough Research & Development efforts or aircraft/munitions production to support a small insurgency in SEA and a major conventional war elsewhere in the world.

In November 1965, we realized the NVA were using Cambodia as well as Laos as a sanctuary.

So, as 1965 drew to a close our expanding ground and air forces had blunted the Communist initiative. But the NVN leadership had changed the tone of the war from guerrilla to conventional and our leadership didn't immediately recognize it.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--GIAP KNEW THE CONFLICT WAS BECOMING A TEST OF NATIONAL AND POLITICAL WILLS, NOT OF MILITARY MIGHT. HE KNEW HE HAD TO CLASSICALLY "PROTRACT" THE WAR TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NVA PATIENCE AND AMERICAN LACK OF IT. AS WE ARE THE SOCIETY TODAY OF FAST FOODS, FAST CARS, FAST EVERYTHING, SO WERE WE THEN. GIAP AND THE OTHER NVA LEADERS OF THE POLITBURO KNEW WE WERE CULTURALLY IMPATIENT AND THEY COULD, IN ALL LIKELIHOOD, OUT WAIT US. THEY WERE RIGHT!

CONTROLLING CENTRALIZED AIR POWER/AIR OPERATIONS (1966):

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By late 1965/early 1966 it was obvious ROLLING THUNDER wasn't meeting the administration's goals. Troops and supplies were still flowing South, and the lethal NVA air defense system was inflicting heavy losses on our aircraft and aircrews. We also found our RF-101 and RF-4 reconnaissance efforts less than satisfactory as we couldn't see the enemy through the thick, 150' high, jungle canopy.

The civilian policy of "gradualism" and target selection did not allow us to attack the military targets which would be most painful to Hanoi. SECDEF McNamara then introduced the first "bombing pause" to give Hanoi (theoretically) a chance to slow up or give up the war. To the civilians in Washington "less" had become "more."

As an old backroom politician, LBJ couldn't understand why Ho wouldn't negotiate. His "whiz kids" also convinced him the bombing campaign wasn't cost effective; in large part due to their own target selection process. It was clear the civilians in the administration controlled military strategy; the military leadership in the Pentagon was practically ignored.

The NVN sent about 4500 men south each month, and combined with the Viet Cong totaled about 230,000 troops; although they avoided contact for the first few months of 1966 due to their large losses in late 65.

The State Department then gave Westmoreland six goals: the first of which was to "attrit" by year's end, VC and NVA forces at a rate as high as their capability to put men on the battlefield. Our leaders felt this action would slow or stop the war by inflicting huge casualties on the NVA. They obviously did not understand the high price the NVN leadership was willing to pay to achieve their political and military objectives (estimates range from 600,000 to 1,000,000 NVN dead).

This attrition strategy led to "body counts" which, coupled with our estimates of "enemy strength," were two volatile issues which typified SECDEF McNamara's obsession with trying to quantify our goals and our successes in the war. Most observers on both sides of the argument concede the body counts were inflated--sometimes purposefully. Many times there were few bodies to count as the VC/NVA took their bodies underground or into the jungle, or used their

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intelligence network to find out about and avoid our planned attacks. In the case of the restricted air campaign, we often attacked at the same times every day, so it wasn't difficult for the VC or NVA to avoid the target area.

Lack of common terminology caused unreliable reporting of mission results between the USAF and USA, and added to the civilian mistrust--even though they required the statistics to enable them to quantify their goals for the war.

We saw USAF and USN flying unit commanders driven and personally evaluated by statistics: sortie rates/plane were measured instead of targets destroyed. In the South the USAF had to stand by while the US Army picked the targets--only the young officers assigned as FACs with the ARVN and USA seemed to make the system work as it should.

Additionally, the senior USAF leadership often thought ground commanders were crying "wolf" too often, calling for close air support missions when they didn't really need air force support.

Early in our involvement living conditions for the USAF were typically poor, and contributed to fatigue among the older USAF personnel. Some improvements occurred in 1966 when the new air base at Phan Rang in III Corps opened.

NOTE: in the USA the young enlisted men aged 18-25 do the bulk of the fighting. In the USAF the flyers are the fighters, generally college graduates over the age of 25.

USAF Major General Momyer took over as 7th Air Force Commander (7 AF/CC), headquartered in Saigon, and pressed to have centralized command and control of all air power in RVN. He argued Westmoreland should not be controlling the USAF B-52's and using them like artillery. He lost the argument.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--GENERAL GIAP WAS UPSET BY THE VC'S FAILURE TO MAINTAIN CONTROL OF THE SOUTH'S MAJOR POPULATED REGIONS. HE DECIDED IT WAS NECESSARY TO IMPLEMENT A BORDER STRATEGY OF CONCENTRATING LARGE NUMBERS OF CONVENTIONAL NVA TROOPS IN THE REMOTE NORTHERN REGIONS OF RVN AND IN THE BORDER SANCTUARIES OF CAMBODIA AND LAOS. HE HOPED TO DRAW U.S. TROOPS AWAY FROM

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THE POPULATION CENTERS OF THE SOUTH, THEREBY ALLOWING THE VC TO ATTACK THERE EFFECTIVELY.

By mid-1966 SECDEF McNamara was totally disenchanted with ROLLING THUNDER, to him it had failed. Daniel Ellsberg (the man who stole the "Pentagon Papers") and other liberals told him the war was immoral and we couldn't win it militarily. McNamara became a dove! He then proposed building the "McNamara Wall." It was to be a 25 mile long defensive barrier of mines, acoustic sensors, barbed wire and infrared detectors stretched across the DMZ to prevent NVA infiltration. McNamara was now telling LBJ we couldn't win the war militarily!! The "Wall" was never completed.

By August 1966 we were flying about 450 B-52 sorties per month against army targets (only in the South). Ground commanders considered them the most effective weapon in RVN.

By the fall of the year we effectively hurt the VC in War Zones C and D ("Iron Triangle" area) about 20 miles northwest of Saigon in III Corps. But enemy troops in the South still totaled about 280,000!

The Pacification program remained a constant problem because we involved too many U.S. and RVN government agencies, and the RVN people historically and culturally supported their family and the village leaders rather than the central government. And of course, they had the heavily armed and ruthless VC to contend with every night in their villages!

The ARVN continued to suffer from high desertion rates and poor leadership. Many troops were underpaid and underfed. Since some officers didn't look after their troops, the troops looted the civilians. This created hatred and lack of support for the ARVN. And, many of these same South Vietnamese also considered the Americans to be just another form of foreign invader. So, in essence, the ARVN created problems for themselves and for the U.S.

1966 truly reflected a total lack of unity and leadership at our national levels. For example, it took so long for the approved air strikes to get to the field commanders from Washington, air strikes approved in Washington weeks earlier often interfered with secret negotiations between the U.S. and the NVN leaders.

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NOTE: IN THE NORTH--THE WAR LOOKED NO MORE PROMISING THERE. WESTMORELAND'S SEARCH AND DESTROY OPERATIONS WERE CAUSING HUGE CASUALTIES--CAUSING THE NVN LEADERSHIP TO CONTINUE THEIR ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE PROPER STRATEGY FOR THE SOUTH. MANY OF THEM WANTED TO SECURE THEIR HOLD ON THE NORTH, WHILE OTHERS WANTED TO CAPTURE THE SOUTH AND THEN SOLIDIFY A "UNIFIED" COUNTRY. STILL OTHER ARGUMENTS REVOLVED AROUND THEIR MILITARY STRATEGY. IN OCTOBER 1966, THE POLITBURO DECIDED TO CONTINUE LARGE CONVENTIONAL BATTLES IN THE SOUTH USING NVA TROOPS, INSTEAD OF REVERTING TO VC TYPE GUERRILLA OPERATIONS OR ABANDONING THEIR PLAN TO ACQUIRE THE RVN.

AIR OPERATIONS--1967:

The USAF introduced many new munitions in 1966 and 1967--most notably Cluster Bomb Units (CBU) and "smart bombs," bombs which actually guided to the target using television, laser, or infrared imaging. They also introduced the AC-130 gunship and A-37 aircraft into combat.

There were three phases in 67: Jan-Apr, May-Sep, Oct-Dec, with the war changing character in each period.

Jan-April saw Operation "CEDAR FALLS" and Operation "JUNCTION CITY" try once again to drive the VC/NVA from War Zone C and the tunnels in the Iron Triangle (one USA battalion commander during this operation was Lt Col Alexander Haig, later a four-star general, advisor to President Nixon during the "Watergate" scandal, and finally the Secretary of State).

These two primarily US Army operations made heavy use of B-52's. By this juncture of the war the USAF permanently stationed these very large strategic bombers at U Tapoa air base in Thailand, as well as Anderson Air Force Base on the Pacific island of Guam.

Although the VC/NVA came back as soon as the U.S. forces left, we seized the initiative from them and they realized they could no longer station their main force NVA units near populated areas. We also severely hurt the VC.

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In all the subsequent ground battles of 1967 air power caused significant loss of VC/NVA lives and played a critical role in preventing our USA/USMC and ARVN forces from being defeated.

April saw the introduction of the F-100-F "MISTY FAC." The USAF converted some of the F-100 Super Sabre fighter-bombers in-country to a "fast FAC" mission; necessary to a pilot's survival if he was to survive in a high threat arena.

Pacification remained a continual struggle as the ARVN troops wanted some of "the action" rather than the tedious and often unrewarding job of pacification. But the program gained strength when Mr. Robert Komer took over with the support of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, consolidating all the pacification programs in-country under one person.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--BY JULY OF 1967 THE NVN HAD SET THEIR STRATEGY FOR THE COMING YEAR. FIRST THEY RECONFIRMED THEIR POLITICAL OBJECTIVE: A "WAR OF LIBERATION" TO BRING RVN UNDER THE CONTROL OF NVN. THEY THEN DETERMINED THE MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND FORCES NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE THEIR ULTIMATE SUCCESS. IN THE NORTH THE ECONOMY WAS SUFFERING BECAUSE SO MANY "CIVILIANS" WERE OCCUPIED WITH AIR DEFENSE OR BOMB DAMAGE REPAIR. THERE WAS ALSO FEAR THE U.S. WOULD GET DESPERATE TO END THE WAR AND BOMB THE RED RIVER DIKES. THEY ALSO REALIZED THEY WERE LOSING THE WAR IN THE SOUTH MILITARILY, AND THEY NEEDED TO CHANGE THAT (IN SPITE OF THE PACIFICATION MESS A LOT OF THE PEASANTS WERE NO LONGER SUPPORTING THEM). FIRM AND DECISIVE ACTION WAS NEEDED, SO THEY DECIDED THE NVA AND THE VC WOULD FILTER INTO SOUTHERN CITIES AND INCITE RIOTS DURING THE 1968 TET HOLIDAY--BRINGING THE POPULACE "SPONTANEOUSLY" OVER TO THEIR SIDE. TO MASK THEIR PLAN, THEY WOULD CONTINUE TO DRAW U.S. TROOPS INTO BATTLES AWAY FROM THE URBAN AREAS, STARTING IN I CORPS. AFTER THE TORRENTIAL NORTHERN RAINS (MONSOONS) STARTED IN OCTOBER, THEY WOULD SHIFT THE BATTLES TO II AND III CORPS.

May to September 1967 saw the North planning for their "Ultimate Victory."

The NVN ASSUMPTIONS: The SVNAF lacked motivation and would desert/defect

The South Vietnamese government of President Thieu had no popular support and the people

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would eagerly rally to the VC and their underground government, the NLF.

The South Vietnamese would turn on the Americans and drive the "imperialist foreigners" out of the country

The U.S.' military position at Khe Sanh in I Corps paralleled the 1954 French military position at Dien Bien Phu.

The NVN PLAN:

Phase I, Sep-Dec 67: Giap would draw U.S. forces out of populated areas.

Phase II: "Tong Cong Kich, Tong Khoi Nghia" or "General Offensive, General Uprising" or TET. Political and military assaults on the cities would disintegrate the U.S.' "puppet" army and government of the RVN.

Phase III: "The Grand Finale"--a large-unit conventional battle between the NVA and the Americans, plus another round of attacks on the cities. It appears Khe Sanh was to be the "set-piece" for this Phase, not another Dien Bien Phu.

The IRONY:

It was a campaign to produce a popular uprising and annihilate the U.S. and SVNAF forces, and...

It was to produce total military and political victory, but...

The NVA's psychological victory created by the U.S. media was purely an accidental by-product.

The American media, who were by now openly anti-war and anti-South Vietnamese government, erroneously confirmed these incorrect assumptions for the NVN Politburo.

Also by mid-1967 American leaders began to lose the psychological war in the U.S. The

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American people decided we were not "making any progress." Middle-class parents viewed the battlefield deaths nightly on TV. Money was diverted from LBJ's social programs causing unrest among the minority segments of the population.

This point in history exemplifies an ideal opportunity for LBJ to exercise decisive leadership. Unfortunately, he didn't take charge of the situation, didn't get the support of the American people, and didn't ask the Congress for a formal declaration of war. We had no national will to prosecute this conflict to a conclusion favorable to us or to the RVN people.

War protesters had the initiative, and there was no media support for the government. This vocal opposition kept LBJ from going after sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and NVN. The government was too often silent on our intentions, our objectives, and our secret negotiations.

The U.S. armed forces wanted to win the war militarily, but civilians changed our national goals: "...to see that the people of RVN are permitted to determine their own future..." and "...this commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself." **THE CIVILIANS THOUGHT THE WAR WAS LOST!**

Senator Stennis of the Senate Armed Services Committee raised hell, and we escalated **ROLLING THUNDER** in September 1967. But the results spotty because we allowed the NVN too much time to make repairs to damaged targets.

ROLLING THUNDER continued until November 1968, but due to its on-again, off-again, tightly controlled graduated attacks, it was not very effective in stopping the flow of troops and supplies into the South.

SIGNIFICANTLY, PHASE I IN THE SOUTH FAILED SINCE GIAP DID NOT DRAW OUR FORCES TO THE PERIPHERIES OF RVN--YET THEY LAUNCHED PHASE II ANYWAY!!

This chapter covered the period 1964-1967. We were in a war with the NVA without a real plan, popular support, or national resolve. By the end of 1967 we were making major military gains and the Pacification program was beginning to show signs of life. However, 1968 was to

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bring Giap's Phase II and attempt at Phase III.

Chapter Three: 1968



I arrived in Vietnam in January 1968 as a 25 year old 1st Lieutenant who married just six months prior to my arrival. I graduated from college just two and one half years prior, and had no more of a clue what was going on in Vietnam than most of you reading this now. I just knew my government leaders asked me to go there to fight in a war. I'll spend this chapter discussing that one year which generated so much controversy.

Since 1968 was a watershed year for our involvement in the Vietnam conflict, it's important you understand the events which took place. Although we had many significant battlefield victories, our government and country were beset with tremendous internal conflicts which impacted our society then, and continues to impact it today.

We'll cover these items:

Background for 1968

Preparing to go to War

The Primary Job of the F-100

Khe Sanh (21 Jan-8 Apr 1968)

Tet (29 Jan-mid Feb 1968)

The Power of the Media

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Background for 1968

The year 1968 saw: one of the most decisive battles in American history (Khe Sanh); an American military triumph transformed into a political and psychological defeat (Tet); an American President announce he would make no effort to continue in office (LBJ); race riots in the major cities of the U.S. (plus two major assassinations and an attempt at a third); the demise of ground strategies on both sides of the war and implementation of new strategies; the demise of the ROLLING THUNDER air bombing campaign; the near destruction of the Pacification program and its later rebound into increased effectiveness; terrible morale and drug problems in the US Army; and the beginning of "serious" negotiations to end the war (at least on our part).

The trigger for all these events was Giap's "Phase II" TET offensive of late January 1968. As we covered in the last chapter, this was an event long planned by the North Vietnamese Politburo.

Preparing to Go to War

Before we start a discussion of Tet, Khe Sanh, etc., let's talk of some personal things; specifically, how does a young pilot get prepared to go to war.

When the year-long USAF pilot training program at Laughlin AFB, Texas, drew to a close I found myself ranked high enough in the class to have a choice of assignments.

I selected the F-100-D SUPER SABRE, a single-seat, single-engine, supersonic fighter first flown in the 1950s. By 1967 it was old and tired, but it was still a great aircraft for a young pilot to cut his teeth on--particularly in combat.

After a short vacation (leave) I went to Fairchild AFB, Washington, to attend Survival School, a once-in-a-lifetime experience which was invaluable training. While there we went through a rigorous physical training (PT) program; we experienced life in a very realistic prisoner-of-war (POW) environment; and we tried to survive in the woods and snow for several days while pursued by USAF personnel simulating the enemy.

After the month-long survival program I went to Cannon AFB, New Mexico, for a six-month upgrade training program in the F-100. We got about 125 hours of flying time, and learned all

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we could about air-to-air combat and dropping munitions on close air support missions. While there I got married.

On Christmas Day 1967 I left for Travis AFB, California, to catch a government contract plane to Clark AB, in the Philippines.

The plane arrived at Clark AB just before New Year's, so we had a pretty decent time waiting for Jungle Survival School to start.

At this three-week survival school we learned about the numerous and gruesome VC booby traps we might come across in the jungle.

Note: VC booby traps caused about 11 percent of our friendly deaths and 15 percent of our wounds.

We then went out in the jungle for about one week to learn how to find survival food and drink if shot down. Once again we had people pursue us, this time though they were local natives, not USAF personnel.

In mid-January 1968 I landed at Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon, and found out no one expected me. I finally had to go find a transport airplane and hitch hike a ride to Phan Rang AB.

By the time I got to Phan Rang one of my F-100 classmates from Cannon was already dead--killed in a traffic pattern accident at Bien Hoa AB, Saigon.

Phan Rang was a decent place to live, just a few miles from the South China Sea in II Corps.

The Primary Job of the F-100

When a new USAF F-100 pilot arrived in the South Vietnam combat zone it was typical for the older, more experienced pilots to take him "under-their-wing" for a few missions. So that's what happened to me. I flew with the same two pilots watching me for about six sorties (flights), and then was turned loose to fly with anyone in the unit (the unit was a tactical fighter

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squadron).

At first it was just a big game--dropping bombs in a big, green, jungle range complex instead of the little targets in the northern desert of New Mexico. But on my sixth or seventh mission I saw the 50 caliber tracers coming up at me and it scared me half to death. It was only then I consciously realized there were people on the ground trying to kill me. After that I was never concerned about any enemy who was on the ground--I just worked at flying the best jet I could, and SURVIVING until my year-long combat tour was over.

At the end of January 1968 all hell broke loose all around the country in VC and NVA offensive soon called the TET Offensive. We pilots didn't know anything about "the big picture," or the politics, or grand U.S. or NVN strategies, we just knew we were flying our tails off. Junior pilots like me only flew once or twice per day, but the old heads flew three times a day, every day. We all got very tired, very fast!

The targets were incredible! I had several right in the "suburbs" of Saigon. We spotted and attacked large concentrations of enemy troops in almost every major city. We caught one VC or NVA group in the cemetery of the beautiful mountain resort city of Dalat, and we proceeded to level it and them. After that fight we experienced few rocket attacks on our air base from Dalat.

How did it all work? Typically, we flew either immediate or preplanned airstrikes. Most of the strikes were preplanned by the higher USAF headquarters in Saigon and then sent out to us via message the day prior. The USAF planners pre-coordinated these missions with the USA and the ARVN to provide specifically requested results. For example, drop some large bombs in the jungle to make a helicopter landing zone.

The immediate strikes were very exciting by comparison. All the fighter units around South Vietnam would place about six F-100s on 24 hour "alert," ready to go at a moment's notice. If something "hot" came up we were "scram-bled" from the alert pad. We usually flew this type of mission when an army unit was getting hit hard by the VC or the NVA and they needed immediate air support to survive the battle.

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The routine: get up, eat, brief, don survival gear, takeoff, contact either a ground or airborne command and control agency for guidance, find the Forward Air Controller

(FAC), go with him to the target, identify and attack the target, try to destroy or neutralize the target, and not get shot down in the process.

There were various targets and missions: Landing Zone (LZ) prep, enemy storage areas, U.S. or ARVN Troops in Contact (TIC) with the enemy's forces, HADES Escort (fly cover for RANCH HAND Agent Orange defoliation missions), Combat SKYSPOT blind radar bombing, etc.

The missions (also called sorties or flights) typically lasted about one and one half hours, although they could extend them for hours if we did in-flight refueling from KC-135 tankers.

With that background, let's look at some history.

Let's look first at the Battle for Khe Sanh.

The "battle" actually began in November 1967 when American intelligence got reports of several NVA divisions moving south along the Ho Chi Minh trail toward Khe Sanh.

The first actual contact with the enemy was a small firefight on 2 January 1968. On 20 January a NVA defector told the US Marine Commander at Khe Sanh that several NVA divisions were poised for an immediate attack on the camp. True to the deserter's predictions, the enemy struck Khe Sanh and its outposts at 0530, 21 January--a full 9 days before TET started! (The VC/NVA loved early morning/late night attacks!)

General Westmoreland ordered OPERATION NIAGARA executed; a mighty "waterfall" of B-52 strikes, tactical fighters and bombers, USMC and USA artillery and mortars. The NVA blew up the main USMC ammunition dump at Khe Sanh almost immediately, so the camp was totally dependent on air power for resupply and the majority of its heavy defense beyond the camp's immediate boundaries.

The U.S. media then leaked the news that Westmoreland and LBJ were discussing the possible

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use of tactical nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--IT WAS CLEAR TO GENERAL GIAP AND THE POLITBURO THAT KHE SANH WAS PERFECT FOR THE USE OF TACTICAL (SMALL YIELD, LIMITED DESTRUCTION) NUCLEAR MUNITIONS. THE AREA WAS VERY REMOTE, RELATIVELY FREE OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE NONCOM-BATANTS, AND THE ENEMY WAS EASILY LOCATED. THE NVN WERE ALARMED BY THE POSSIBILITIES!

However, as in the case with President Truman during the Korean conflict, the media attention erased any hope of surprise or veiled threats against the attacking communist forces. It also eliminated one of our president's military options from the equation. Perhaps rational thought by our military and civilian leaders took the day. In any case, we did not use nuclear weapons, and the NVA had one less threat to worry about during their prolonged attack on Khe Sanh.

The fight raged until 10 February when something strange happened, **GIAP BEGAN TO WITHDRAW UNITS FROM KHE SANH AND SEND THEM TO REINFORCE HIS OTHER TROOPS AT HUE.**

On 29 February at 2130 hours (9:30 PM), air power drove back an NVA division tried to overrun the camp from the east. Air power also repulsed a second attempt at 2330 hours. A final thrust on 1 March at 0315 met the same fate. These three attacks on 29 Feb-1 Mar marked the turning point of the siege--the enemy never mounted another major attack. Air power (coupled with the USMC organic firepower) had broken the back of the siege. Almost 1800 tons of bombs were dropped/day, and we killed thousands of NVA regulars.

By 7 March the NVA began to withdraw in mass, and by 8 April U.S. forces were able to relieve the troops at Khe Sanh.

The siege of Khe Sanh is unique not only because it received so much media coverage, but also because it is the singular battle of the war which most perplexes those who study it.

First, Giap clearly intended to overrun Khe Sanh as part of his Phase III of the war. But Giap must have realized early in February that Phase II (TET), the necessary foundation for Phase III, had failed miserably from a military perspective. Why did he proceed? Were his hopes

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bolstered by the U.S. media which called TET a U.S. defeat? Second, Giap kept too many troops at Khe Sanh to just threaten it or use it as a diversion, and too few to overrun it. Why? And third, he sent too few troops to Hue to effectively help the intense month-long battle there. Why? Finally, Giap did not attack Khe Sanh's single, and extremely vulnerable, water supply. Why?

The mysteries remain as to Giap's actions.

Now let's pick up our discussion of TET.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--GIAP ORIGINALLY SET THE ATTACK DATE FOR HIS PHASE II (TET OFFENSIVE) FOR 29-30 JANUARY; AFTER THE BATTLE OF KHE SANH WAS ALREADY IN FULL SWING. BUT JUST PRIOR TO THE ATTACKS GIAP SLIPPED THEM 24 HOURS AND SOME OF HIS UNITS DIDN'T GET THE WORD. THEREFORE THERE WERE SOME PREMATURE ATTACKS ON 29-30 JANUARY WHICH COST GIAP THE ELEMENT OF TOTAL SURPRISE. EVEN SO HE PROCEEDED, ATTACKING INTO THE OVERWHELMING FIREPOWER AND MOBILITY OF THE COMBINED US AND RVN FORCES.

The MACV intelligence staff briefed General Westmoreland and he placed his command and the country on alert. Meanwhile the RVN people, although warned about an impending attack, refused to believe the VC/NVA would violate their very sacred TET holiday (to Christians it is similar to a combination of Easter and Christmas). Many of the SVNAF were on holiday with their families rather than at their designated military posts.

During the night (30-31 Jan) Giap launched his countrywide offensive against most of major cities and towns throughout the entire country. U.S. and SVNAF forces quickly beat off the assaults in most cities, but the fighting in Saigon continued for two weeks, and in Hue for almost one month (as somewhat loosely depicted in the recent movie Full Metal Jacket). While in Hue the Communists slaughtered thousands of civilians and buried them in mass graves.

For Giap and the Communists, the "General Offensive, General Uprising" failed with enormous casualties!! They lost about 45,000 of the 84,000 troops who made the attacks, mostly in the ranks of the Viet Cong. Not only were the VC losses heavy, they were concentrated in their political leadership cadres who surfaced during the attacks. They believed their own

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propaganda which stated the civilians of the south would rise up and join them. The NVA effectively moved the VC out of the way, and the "northerners" now carried the fight to accomplish Ho's objectives.

In truth, the TET offensive almost totally destroyed the VC. The "General Uprising" of the people never arose, the SVNAF did not defect/surrender to the NVA, and the people did not turn against the Americans and join the ranks of the ranks of the Communists. The NVN People's War of Liberation proved to be exactly what it always had been, an out and out invasion of the south by the north to overthrow the central government and combine both countries under the communist regime of Ho Chi Minh.

Just as important, the ARVN and the VNAF finally fought well, and many of the people awakened from their lethargy and chose sides for the first time in the conflict. The SVN leadership undertook a huge mobilization effort, and thousands enlisted in the armed forces to support the central RVN government. The NVN leadership had believed all the "poor mouthing" about the ARVN as reported in our media. They were surprised by the ARVN tenacity, as were many on our side.

Note: it is a common misconception in this country to believe the SVNAF did not fight hard to defend their own country. In the process of trying to stop first an internal insurrection, and then a full-blown conventional invasion, without strong RVN political or military leadership, the SVNAF lost about 223,000 dead and over 570,000 wounded.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--THE POLITBURO KNEW THEY HAD FASHIONED A HUGE BATTLEFIELD FAILURE. THEY DECIDED THE PLAN WAS SOUND, BUT HAD BEEN POORLY EXECUTED BY GIAP AND HIS OFFICERS. THEY ORDERED IT TRIED AGAIN IN MAY 1968. MANY DEFECTIONS ENSUED, WITH TWO VC GENERALS TELLING US THEY NO LONGER BELIEVED THE COMMUNISTS COULD MILITARILY WIN THE WAR.

The Reaction in America and the Media

Giap's offensive did gain some tactical surprise. We didn't believe they would attack during TET or mount the number of simultaneous attacks that they did. We didn't believe they would

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attack into our strength--the cities. ("One never attributes folly to his enemy...")

NOTE: the TET Offensive sounds very much like Hitler's last-ditch attack into Allied strength during The Battle of the Bulge (Ardennes Forest) in WWII. It would be very interesting to imagine how the Vietnam War would have culminated if our media had reported TET as the U.S./RVN military victory it was, rather than turning it into a resounding U.S./RVN psychological defeat. Would the NVN leadership have given up?

The American people were reassured for many months prior to TET that we were winning the war in Vietnam; and in fact, we were militarily. Even though our political leaders had an inkling there was a major attack brewing they did not prepare the public for it.

The media kept hammering at the theme that TET was an American disaster. In retrospect, many learned journalists criticize their own for faulty reporting. TV coverage shattered public morale and destroyed support for the war. Howard K. Smith, ABC News: "VC losses were 100 times ours. But we never told the public that. We just showed pictures day after day of Americans getting hell kicked out of them. That was enough to break America apart." Many people thought the war was the most destructive ever fought...it wasn't.

Even after it became apparent to everyone the magnitude of Giap's losses, "...in the case of NEWSWEEK, NBC, and CBS...the disaster theme seemed to be exploited for its own sake."

Walter Cronkite, a very powerful TV news personality in 1968, called TET a loss and demanded immediate negotiations to end the conflict. His word, as the CBS Evening News anchor revered by millions in this nation, carried influence well beyond his social or political station. His comments turned the opinions of many against the war.

Why did the media report as they did? There are several theories offered by the many authors who have tackled this question over the years.

First, enforced isolation: the typically youthful media was separated from the RVN people by a language barrier, and from the U.S. military leadership by age, differing moralistic attitudes, and political prejudices. Just as there was another generation gap between the military

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commanders, most of whom had fought their way through WW II and Korea, and the "wet-behind-the-ears-Whiz Kids" who were in the decision-making process in Washington.

Reporting Vietnam became a closed, self-generating system sustained by the acclaim the journalists heaped on each other. Thus, they held their own views and published them, regardless of the facts anyone in the military hierarchy or the political bureaucracy provided them. In short, they felt their facts were the only "true" facts. Everyone and anyone in a position of authority in Saigon was a liar, or was concealing the truth, or didn't have the big picture. The reporters felt only they knew the real story. In many cases they were correct of course, but the lack of trust between the major players concerned led to some very erroneous and psychologically damaging reporting overall.

Second, herd instinct: many newsmen covered the war negatively because their fellow newsmen reported it that way. The reporter who went against the flow often risked personal and professional ostracism. Most of the journalists were very young and woefully uninformed about "no front" guerrilla warfare, and war in general. They personally lived primarily in comfort in Saigon or other major cities or base camps. Many of them saw how senior decision makers and support personnel lived there in comfort, while the fighting troops lived like animals in the jungle--the contrast in lifestyles made them very cynical.

And of course, the U.S. administration was trying to fight a tidy little war! They were not willing to tell the American people the full price of involvement! They wouldn't tell us what value there was in our involvement. The press saw that.

It was to be a "business as usual" war, with all the amenities of home provided to the fighters at base camps. Have a war, but don't hurt or kill anyone; make them comfortable, and don't arouse anyone back home! The press aroused us. Body bags on the six o'clock news while mom and pop were eating dinner caused a lot of arousal.

Third. Besides the obvious mistrust among all the key players in this war, one of the more important reasons for lack of objectivity is attributed to the politicization of the correspondents who were collectively and instinctively "anti-government" and "antimilitary." These people overwhelmingly considered themselves "liberals," and were writing, not only for themselves,

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but for the ones who would promote them, again an admitted overwhelmingly liberal groups of editors, bureau chiefs, etc.

Of course, having TV coverage at the dinner table every night had a tremendous negative impact. We didn't see the losses on the other side--only our own. And it was too easy to generalize (just like PLATOON and several other movies which are out, which combine every cliché about the war into one 100-minute movie).

TV needs action to be effective. Burning Vietnamese hooches seemed to tell the folks at home (and around the world) that we were killing innocent civilians and destroying their property, instead of also showing viewers and readers the tunnels hidden underneath the villages filled with enemy troops, arms, food, hospitals, etc.

LBJ and the military leaders never set the record straight! Even without the all-important formal declaration of war by the Congress, they, particularly LBJ, had the power to go over or around the media reporting coming out of SVN, but he did not use this power. The NVA Politburo apparently used our media more effectively than we did! LBJ's lack of presidential leadership at this point has never been understood. As one author stated, "He had lost the battle of the mind to the news media, and the battle of the soul to his antiwar critics."

It was also unfortunate that at this exact juncture the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) General Earle Wheeler asked General Westmoreland if he "needed" any more troops. After much discussion and pressuring from Wheeler, Westmoreland agreed that he could eventually use more troops.

While he intended them to drive the stake home while he had the NVA and the VC vulnerable, beaten, and on the run, the media did not report it that way. We only see Westmoreland asking Wheeler for 206,000 more troops in the aftermath of TET. And Wheeler knew he could get those troops from LBJ and the Congress only by painting a gloomy picture of the situation in RVN and causing LBJ to call up the Reserves, something the JCS wanted to do to protect Europe but LBJ did not.

Subsequently, the New York Times reported on their front page that General Westmoreland

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needed the troops to stave off defeat! The article was a huge blow to the Administration's claim of victory.

Now the battle lines were drawn:

SECSTATE Rusk and the JCS favored escalation--go on the offensive to follow up the triumphs at Khe Sanh and TET.

The new SECDEF Clark Clifford and the "Doves" supported a three--part strategy: pull back our troops to the cities, stop the air war against the North, and transfer the burden of fighting to the SVNAF ASAP.

Clark Clifford became LBJ's turncoat! LBJ wanted his new SECDEF to support him on the war, but Clifford, under pressure from Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke, turned on him. LBJ never forgave Clifford and his "Wise Men" advisors for convincing him to change his policies on Vietnam. We were now on the defensive.

The American public was also dispirited, but not necessarily in an anti-war sense. Many felt it was an error for us to be involved, but since we were there they felt LBJ was not prosecuting the war dynamically enough.

The U.S. decided to pursue a new policy which later became known under Nixon as Vietnamization: phase out U.S. troops, turn over the war to the South Vietnamese, and begin negotiations with NVN.

Unfortunately and characteristically this U.S. policy change was done without even consulting the heads of the RVN government! And South Vietnam was a country which still wasn't capable of defending its own borders! A "cut and run" policy for us and the turning over of the war to the government and armed forces of Thieu which were still quite shaky.

This marked the end of the United States' open-ended commitment to the RVN.

On 21 March LBJ sent Westmoreland to Washington to be the number one soldier in the USA,

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Army Chief of Staff; and replaced him with General Creighton Abrams. The U.S. press reported it as Westmoreland's firing.

On 31 March LBJ announced he would not allow any bombing above the 19th Parallel, and would not run for reelection. OPERATION NIAGARA ended at Khe Sanh that day as well, and we drastically cut the role of the USAF as the U.S. began its gradual withdrawal from the war. Vietnam had, however, shown our military and political leaders that strategic air forces (B-52s) alone were not enough to support a ground force in this type conflict. We had to complement strategic forces with conventional tactical fighter/bomber forces.

In May the Communists tried a mini-TET and were repelled once again. They then reverted to guerrilla attacks, and made no main force attacks the remainder of 1968. These Communist defeats also led to tremendous growth in the Pacification program. More and more South Vietnamese people rallied to the side of the RVN government as the SVNAF and USA minimized VC interference in the villages, and the people began to feel secure.

Violence in the U.S. escalated dramatically in 1968. Gunmen shot two presidential candidates, with Robert F. Kennedy dying in Los Angeles, while Governor George Wallace of Alabama spent the remainder of his life paralyzed. That year there also were many racial riots as black people in many of the major cities rioted both before and after the shooting death of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee (e.g., Newark, New Jersey; Detroit, Michigan; Los Angeles, California). One of the reasons offered for the riots were the unkept promises made to our minorities by Johnson's Great Society programs and civil rights programs. The bottom line was, you can't simultaneously fight an expensive war abroad and have expensive social welfare programs at home.

Fall brought the presidential campaign to a head. There were riots at Democratic Convention in Chicago, led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin of the Youth International Party ("Yippies"), Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Bobby Seale, a leader of the Black Panthers. The "Chicago Seven," as they became known, disrupted the convention so much they even alienated many anti-war sympathizers.

LBJ wanted an end to the bombing and the beginnings of serious negotiations to help the

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campaign of Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey (HHH) against Richard Nixon. So on 31 October LBJ entirely shut off the bombing of the North. The NVN gave up absolutely nothing in return they were not about to negotiate until they saw the results of the election! As a result, negotiations went nowhere.

RVN's President Thieu adamantly opposed the talks because he felt they gave VC undeserved legal status (much like Israel's position concerning the legitimacy of the PLO as spokespersons for the Palestinians).

Johnson later told President-elect Nixon that all sixteen bombing halts were a major mistake on his part! The NVN leadership simply saw them all as a sign of weakness on our part, and gave them the unrestricted ability to rebuild their defenses and resupply their troops.

President Nixon initially felt he could scare the NVN into submission by threatening them with annihilation as President Eisenhower had done with the Chinese in Korea.

So 1968 came to a close with a new President elected, and both sides of the war in disarray. It had been a turbulent year for the country--but I had personally survived my 200+ combat missions. Now I had to deal with coming home.

We had inflicted tremendous casualties on the VC and NVA, yet lost the initiative and the psychological war. The lack of policy and direction had stifled our military efforts, and we continued to flounder. We had turned a corner, we had turned our back on the war, and were just looking for a way out.

About the only bright spot was the continuing professional performance of our troops under extremely trying conditions, and the resurrection of the Pacification/Vietnamization program. Our troops performance was to change dramatically in 1969.

The "Peace Talks" started but the U.S. accomplished nothing for years--not until the communists had us where they wanted us--desperate and impatient, wanting out of the conflict at any cost.

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Chapter Four: VIETNAMIZATION, 1969-1972



As we begin this chapter remember, at the end of 1968 the Vietnam War was the central issue in military and political thinking here at home. Not only was the American public becoming more and more dispirited, but disagreement within the government itself became a real problem. The JCS wanted to escalate and win a military victory. Secretary of Defense Clifford and the doves were urging LBJ to negotiate at any cost.

The 1968 Tet Offensive changed the nature of American involvement in Vietnam. Our civilian leaders now favored withdrawal, but newly elected President Nixon took a different approach than LBJ.

This chapter covers:

Nixon's Early Moves

1970 attack into Cambodia

1971 attack into Laos

The NVA 1972 Spring (Easter) Offensive

Operations LINEBACKER and LINEBACKER II

The 1973 Peace Treaty

War Powers Resolution

Nixon's Early Moves

1969: President Nixon and his newly appointed Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry A. Kissinger, entered office in January and began to look for a way to separate the country from the conflict in Vietnam. They both agreed they would control the policy and conduct of the war from the White House, and not let the Congress or any other part of the bureaucracy dictate to them.

1970 Attack into Cambodia

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NOTE: IN THE NORTH--THE POLITBURO DECIDED TO TEST PRESIDENT NIXON EARLY ON AND SEE HOW HE WOULD REACT. SO THEY LAUNCHED AN ATTACK ON U.S. FORCES AND INSTALLATIONS IN FEBRUARY 69. THE ATTACKS WERE ONCE AGAIN MILITARILY RE-PULSED, BUT IN THE U.S. THE MEDIA HAD A FIELD DAY--CONTINUING TO CITE EVERY NVA EFFORT AS A VICTORY FOR THEM AND ANOTHER REASON FOR US TO GIVE UP OUR "FAILED" POLICY AND OUR "UNWINNABLE" WAR. JUST GET OUT OF VIETNAM.

These attacks infuriated Nixon. After searching for a good way to retaliate, Nixon decided in March 1969 to approve B-52 strikes against NVA staging areas for attacks into South Vietnam, and against the NVN headquarters for controlling the VC called the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). Although we knew the NVN and VC moved the headquarters periodically, our intelligence branches now thought the headquarters was in Cambodia just across the border from the RVN province of Tay Ninh.

With the tacit approval of the Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, we proceeded Operation MENU, saturation bombing sorties by USAF B-52s. Nixon limited these sorties to an area within five miles of the South Vietnamese border. In the aftermath of the attacks, neither the Cambodians nor the NVN used the U.S. media to complain about the attacks (called Operation MENU), so they remained a secret.

Note: in truth, it was doubtful if Nixon or Kissinger really felt Prince Sihanouk would object. For years he had allowed the VC and the NVA to use Cambodia as a sanctuary for their troops and supplies. A large part of the war supplies reaching the NVA/VC by sea came in through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville.

The massacre of South Vietnamese villagers at My Lai came to light in March 1969. Actually occurring in early 1968, many attribute this inexcusable act to American troops who grew frustrated by dying at the hands of the invisible, but ever-present enemy. While this act is a disgrace to our American fighting forces, and can certainly not be dismissed, readers must recognize that this was an exception to our troops' normal exceptional conduct in this war. The same cannot be said for the NVA and the VC who used terrorism and murder as a normal part of their "indoctrination" of South Vietnamese peasants. They killed thousands of governments

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leaders, teachers, etc., during the course of their takeover of the south.

In May 1969 the NEW YORK TIMES finally broke the Operation MENU story, and anti-war protests followed immediately against the "widening" of the war. These protesters seemed to forget the NVA were using the Cambodian sanctuary to kill American troops.

In spite of the protests, the operation continued until August 1973; although later bombings called Operation FREEDOM DEAL were directed against both the NVA/VC and Cambodian communists (the Khmer Rouge).

The leak of this operation to the media caused President Nixon and his administration to become preoccupied with leaks by any member of the inner group who knew of Nixon's plans. This preoccupation eventually led to wiretaps and ultimately to Watergate.

In a May TV address Nixon said he ruled out a purely military solution, but also ruled out "...a one-sided withdrawal...." But he also stated reports from Hanoi seem to indicate the enemy "...is counting on the collapse of American will...." How prophetic he was!

A Shau Valley sits astride a branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the NVA used it as a base camp, funneling men and supplies into the I Corps area near the ancient capital of Hue. In May 69, in a violent battle for control of Hamburger Hill near A Shau, we were successful in driving out the NVA. It was a very costly victory for the U.S., however, in terms of human life. And once again anti-war protesters screamed about us escalating the war and needlessly killing our young men. Perhaps in this case they were correct, for as soon as we left the area, the NVA returned!

The word then went out from Washington to General Abrams to hold down American casualties. This was the beginning of the demoralization of the US Army. Why get killed in a "no-win war?" Anti-war dissidents began to make the troops question the competence and integrity of their leaders. Racial tension and drugs began to be a problem. U.S. troops killed and injured, or "fragged," their own officers and NCOs with fragmentation grenades.

NOTE: this period is primarily what you see in film clips about how bad serving in Vietnam was!

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In June Nixon met Thieu on Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean to outline the new U.S. four-part policy: U.S. troop withdrawals

Vietnamization of the war

Continued Pacification of the land

Continued Negotiations to end the war

By July it was clear the NVN had "withdrawn" to a form of guerilla warfare. Nixon wrote Ho a letter trying to get negotiations started. Ho answered on 12 August when the NVN attacked over 100 cities, and Nixon received a "less than friendly" letter in return.

Nixon was angry and wanted to retaliate but did not for fear of more anti-war protests. It was clear he was making national policy with one eye on the protesters. The protesters wanted nothing less than a total American retreat from Vietnam, the abandonment of the Thieu government, and the public surrender of RVN to the Communists. And they didn't want to get shot at!

NVN Premier Pham Von Dong sends a message to the dissenters urging them on!!

Nixon went on TV in November and got the support of the "Great Silent Majority" for his Vietnam policy. He said: "...let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that." It was now "Nixon's War," but we had an articulated and publicly supported policy at last. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before we Americans defeated and humiliated ourselves in our handling of this conflict.

While there was a lot of confusion surrounding Nixon's Vietnamization plan, we made progress, as both the U.S. military and the Thieu regime were trying to make it work. But the RVN hated the term because it implied they had not been fighting to save their own country. The RVN also thought the program was more for U.S. media consumption than a program they needed to make work. As Thieu has stated many times, they really thought the U.S. would support them forever.

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The nature of the ARVN itself restricted the Vietnamization process. The South Vietnamese infantry was much more regional and static than was militarily required because of loyalty to family and region. In fact, the families often went with the soldiers and added to the confusion of battle.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--NEGOTIATIONS STALLED IN 69 BECAUSE THE NVN WANTED TOTAL AND UNCONDITIONAL VICTORY, NOT COMPROMISE. THEY SAW TROOP WITHDRAWALS AND ANTI-WAR PROTESTS WEAKENING NIXON. THEY HAD A SIMPLE GOAL--TOTAL AND UNILATERAL U.S. WITHDRAWAL BEFORE ANY TALKS COULD TAKE PLACE.

William E. Colby of the CIA replaced Robert Komer and continued with the Vietnamization/Pacification programs. At the end of 69 we considered about 90% of the villages secure. SVNAF forces had grown to about 900,000 while the U.S. reduced its forces to about 500,000 (all services).

NOTE: this is another period when we could have won the war militarily. We could have stopped the infiltration by effectively taking the war to the north.

1970: Nixon realized Vietnamization would not work if the enemy continued to use sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos for staging, recuperation, and refitting. Something had to be done.

In March 1970 Lon Nol ousted the Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, from power, and immediately announced his desire to drive the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. The NVA immediately began a drive to the West and soon the VC/NVA were threatening the capitol of Phnom Penh. It soon became clear the government of Cambodia would go down the drain if the U.S. didn't do something.

With Lon Nol's blessing Nixon decided the RVN would attack the "Parrot's Beak" and U.S. forces would attack in the "Fish Hook," two areas on the RVN-Cambodian border in the III and IV Corps regions.

The attack started on 1 May with massive B-52 and fighter support, but the VC/NVA fled in the

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face of the attacks, giving up huge caches of arms and supplies. However, we failed to destroy COSVN HQ once again.

This operation was successful militarily as it closed the port of Sihanoukville to the NVA and probably set back the NVA timetable about 12-18 months; but it did not deliver a decisive blow to the enemy. It also brought massive protests in the U.S.

College campuses erupted in protest against "widening" the war. Students burned Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) units to the ground. At Kent State University in Ohio, National Guard troops killed four students who were involved in a large campus protest.

In May the Senate repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and in June passed the Cooper-Church Amendment barring funds for the support of U.S. combat operations in Cambodia, or operations with Cambodia military forces without Congressional approval. The House rejected the measure but a December version in a defense appropriations bill barred U.S. troops in Laos or Thailand.

Negotiations continued to drag on. The NVN saw no need to negotiate as they felt the war protesters and Congress would eventually give them what they wanted.

Pacification was also working to a degree. But while the peasants were no longer loyal to the VC, they still were relatively neutral toward the central government. The same corrupt and incompetent officials remain at district level and above, the military officers remained politicized, and the soldiers undisciplined and piratical.

By year's end the U.S. further reduced its forces to 335,000 (all services).

1971 Attack into Laos

The SVNAF began a raid against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos on 30 January 1971 code named Operation Lam Son 719. (Lam Son was the historic home of Le Loi, the Vietnamese hero discussed in Chapter One.) Designed to wipe out two major NVA sanctuaries and capture the town of Tchepone on Route Nine, we estimated it would buy at least a year free from major

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NVA attacks, and give Vietnamization a chance to succeed.

By the end of February it was plain that even with supporting USAF firepower, President would have to evacuate the SVNAF from Laos. The NVA threw more than 30,000 troops into the battle to protect their vital logistics area. Coupled with the terrain, the weather, and the incompetence and lack of professionalism of the SVNAF leadership the overall battle was a disaster. The SVNAF did not achieve its objectives, and there were large casualties on both sides.

U.S. forces also suffered casualties in this operation. Because of congressional restrictions we fought a back-door, holding action from Khe Sanh, which also straddled Route Nine and which we had reoccupied.

Just as tragically, it showed the SVNAF were still completely dependent on U.S. forces to keep the battle plan together when under fire. The excursion into the teeth of an area the NVA had to protect instead of leaving, proved in truth, Vietnamization wasn't working very well.

The U.S. and the RVN leadership spent the rest of 1971 trying to fix the problems of Vietnamization, and trying to keep the US Army from continuing to disintegrate.

In Laos, the NVA and Pathet Lao controlled the Northern two-thirds of the country after defeating CIA supported MEO guerrillas.

In June, Daniel Ellsberg stole the Top Secret "Pentagon Papers," officially called The History of the U.S. Decision Making Process on Vietnam, from the Department of Defense (DOD). Ellsberg was a "hawk" hired as a "Whiz Kid" by SECDEF McNamara who was now a "dove". The New York Times published the appendices after a spirited debate in the courts. This "leak" contributed to the paranoia in the Nixon administration about not being able to protect classified or any other sensitive from publication in the media.

The NVA 1972 Spring (Easter) Offensive

By early 1972 U.S. troop strength was down from 500,000 to 200,000.

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NOTE: IN THE NORTH--THE NVN CONTINUED TO HOLD OUT IN NEGOTIATIONS. THEY WERE LOSING SOME OF THEIR GRIP ON THE SOUTH AND DIDN'T WANT TO NEGOTIATE FROM A POSITION OF WEAKNESS. BESIDES, THEY WERE CONFIDENT THE U.S. PROTESTERS WOULD EVENTUALLY FORCE NIXON TO THROW OVER THE THIEU GOVERNMENT, AND, THE LAM SON 719 FIASCO HAD CONVINCED THEM THEY COULD DEFEAT THE SVNAF ON THE BATTLEFIELD EVEN WITH MASSIVE USAF AIR POWER. THE 19TH PLENUM DECIDED TO WIN THE WAR MILITARILY BY LAUNCHING AN ALL-OUT CONVENTIONAL INVASION SOMETIME IN 1972 (SUPPORTED BY HEAVY ARMS FROM MOSCOW). WHILE THEY WERE UNCERTAIN ABOUT THE EXACT TIMING, THIS WAS PLANNED TO BE THE BIGGEST SINGLE MILITARY OFFENSIVE SINCE THE CHINESE INVADED KOREA OR THE NAZIS UNLEASHED THE BLITZKRIEG.

On 30 March (Easter Offensive) some 125,000 NVA troops supported by hundreds of tanks, SAMs, and artillery invaded the south across the DMZ into I Corps and from their sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia into II and III Corps. The attack essentially had three prongs: North, Central, and South.

On Nixon's orders, the USAF redeployed many aircraft back into the region to support the SVNAF from bases in Okinawa and Thailand. B-52s and fighters struck in the north for the first time since November 71.

Nixon and Kissinger believed the NVA invasion was a test of both the RVN and the U.S.--and the outcome would be key to future negotiations.

By May the ARVN were fleeing south from the attack across the DMZ--leaving vast quantities of arms behind. They finally held a line near the provincial capital city of Quang Tri. The second VNA pincer move in the North came from A Shau toward Hue-hoping to cut off the northern provinces. With the help of U.S. air power (AC-130s, B-52s, fighters), the SVNAF started a counter-offensive in June.

The second major front was against Kontum and Pleiku in the Central Highlands; hoping to drive to the sea and cut the country in half.

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The third major front was in the south against An Loc and Loc Ninh, driving down Route 13 toward Saigon. Massive B-52 and fighter support eventually broke the siege at An Loc which lasted from April to June (C-130s supplied city).

NOTE: NVN had tremendous supply problems trying to fight a war on three fronts and having to bring all their supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The SVNAF drove the entire invasion back by May with tremendous casualties on both sides. Overall, U.S. air power turned the battle. Estimates of NVA casualties run as high as 100,000, with killed estimates as high as 50,000. We also destroyed about 450 NVA tanks and numerous artillery pieces. The NVA lost their opportunity to defeat the United States militarily, and hadn't achieved any of their goals. A large part of the credit for the stopping the second major NVA invasion of the south must go to Nixon who brought back our air power over the objections of his SECDEF and SECSTATE.

The NVN replaced General Giap as the NVA field commander.

But the offensive had eroded all remaining support for Nixon's plan, Vietnamization was seen as a hollow program. The RVN knew they almost lost the war. We also knew the SVNAF were still too dependent on U.S. advisors and U.S. air power. Another NVN military defeat became a psychological victory!

On 28 June, Nixon announced no more draftees would be sent to Vietnam. That ended the protests on the college campuses. As General Davidson says in his book: "One can only conclude that the students' professed concern for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people was in reality a much greater concern for a lower part of their own anatomy."

Operation Linebacker I (May-Oct 1972):

When the Easter Offensive looked like a military victory for the NVA, negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho drug on. The Communists were unwilling to talk, so Nixon decided to

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unleash our air power with targeting done by the military, not the politicians.

He started an intensive bombing campaign called LINEBACKER I against the NVN. The USAF started using "smart bombs" (e.g., laser guided) to hit targets precisely, and prevent/lessen collateral civilian damage. These munitions allowed us to go after targets previously declared "off-limits."

In May it appeared LINEBACKER was going nowhere and the NVA invasion was going strong. More and more USAF and USN aviators were shot down and imprisoned in North Vietnam's harsh POW camps. Nixon ordered the Navy to mine Haiphong harbor--sea traffic ceased. This was strong message to the Russians, Chinese, and NVN that Nixon wouldn't back off. To the NVN it was even more threatening. The U.S. would escalate and continue to punish the NVN, as they were now essentially cut off from all Chinese or Russian resupply.

NOTE: June 72, Virginia police arrested the "Plumbers," the anti-leak group within the administration, breaking into National Democratic Headquarters. This eventually led to the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation.

"Peace" talks resumed between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho from mid-July into December. The NVN begin to soften their position under prodding from the Soviets and in response to better and better terms from the U.S.

But President Thieu was frightened. He knew the RVN was totally dependent on the U.S. and the U.S. was trying to negotiate their way out of the war. Thieu nit-picked the terms, the ambiguity, and the confusion contained in the language of the documents; He was concerned about losing RVN as a sovereign nation.

In November 1972, the American people reelected President Nixon in a landslide. The large youth vote gives credence to the relationship between the end of the draft and the end of campus anti-war protests.

On 10 December the negotiations broke down as the NVN change their positions and rewrite the agreements to their advantage.

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Operation LINEBACKER II (Dec 72):

On 15 December Nixon sent a note to Hanoi demanding they reopen negotiations within 72 hours or face the consequences. He phoned Admiral Moorer, Chairman, JCS, and told him: "I don't want anymore of this crap about the fact we couldn't hit this target or that one. This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war, and if you don't I'll hold you responsible."

In the 12 days starting on 18 December we destroyed NVN's industry, its ability to defend itself, and its economy. We flew over 700 B-52 missions and about 700 fighter sorties. Flying free of SAMs the last three days, we lost only 26 aircraft (15 B-52s).

Hanoi came back to the negotiating table, very concerned about what Nixon might do next. Their fears were fueled by our media which was, as usual, in outrage over the attacks in North Vietnam which were killing "innocent civilians."

Editorial Note: in my view, considering the massive national mobilization effort in NVN, there were very few true "civilians" in the north. They were filling bomb craters, manning AAA sites, moving supplies, something...they were all involved.

The 1973 Peace Treaty

The U.S. and the NVN signed the "Peace" Treaty in January 1973, just days after LBJ's death. President Thieu reluctantly agreed to the seven main points:

Cease-fire in place

Withdraw both U.S. and NVA troops, exchange of POWs within 60 days

Prohibited U.S./NVN from sending more troops to RVN

Equipment would be replaced only on a one-for-one basis

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Established integrity of DMZ based on the Geneva Accords of 1954

Laos and Cambodia to be neutral

Set up commission to enforce the cease-fire and compliance with the agreement, as well as to organize free elections in the south.

The terms of the Peace Treaty were obviously a joke, and very unenforceable. In fact, when Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Tho knew the NVN leadership was already finalizing their takeover plans. But the 1973 Peace Treaty ended Indochina War II and started Indochina War III.

As expected the War Commission proved worthless. Organizationally, the SVNAF were still not ready to defend their nation. The NVA immediately violated the peace accords by upgrading their facilities and forces in the RVN. They infiltrated 75,000 more troops. They erected SAM sites at Khe Sanh. They increased tanks to 500 in RVN, built 13 airfields, and added 12,000 miles of roads in RVN. They then proceeded to build a radio network to link their troops and beam propaganda to world that the RVN was violating the treaty.

The blatant violations deeply upset Kissinger, and he wanted to bomb the DMZ or the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the Watergate scandal preoccupied Nixon.

June 73 Congress passed the Case-Church Amendment which cutoff funds for combat operations over or in Cambodia and Laos.

On 1 July Congress passed a bill which prohibited direct or indirect combat action over, on, or near Laos, Cambodia and both Vietnams (with this bill Congress freed the NVN to strike whenever it so desired).

War Powers Resolution

Congress passed The War Powers Resolution in November 1973 over the veto of President

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Nixon. It requires the President to consult Congress before using troops in any armed conflict. The President can continue such use for 60 days without Congressional approval, and another 30 days if he certified in writing that the safety of the forces requires it. If Congress did not then declare war or authorize continued use the President must bring the troops home.

Congress cuts aid from \$1.6 B--we were turning our backs on RVN once and for all.

Chapter Five: Communist Takeover/Lessons Learned



April 30th, 1990 marked the 15th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and South Vietnam to the Communists. Fifteen years of Communist control since the "liberation" and what is the status of the people? Were they really liberated? Were they happy to see the North Vietnamese Communists take over control of their country? Is that why so many fled? Is the country economically successful now?

This chapter is the last in our series dealing with Vietnam and our involvements in that country. By now you should have gained some token of appreciation for what went on in Vietnam, and can leave this short text more in-formed. In this last chapter we'll take a look at a few topics which I'll describe as controversial at best, certainly not conclusive.

We'll cover these topics:

The Communist Takeover in 1975

Lessons "Learned," at least in theory!

Some Impacts of Vietnam

As we stated in the last chapter, immediately after signing the "Peace" Treaty the NVN started violating it. Nixon was busy with Watergate, and couldn't fight off the budgetary cuts being

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made by Congress.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--IN OCTOBER 1973 THE 21ST PLENUM MET AND DECIDED THE PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN WITHIN THE UNITED STATES WAS BEGINNING TO BEAR CONSIDERABLE FRUIT. THE LEADERSHIP MADE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO SWITCH FROM A POLITICAL BATTLE TO A WAR-WINNING MILITARY OFFENSIVE. THEIR TIME-TABLE WAS SOME-WHAT UNCLEAR--LOOKING TO EITHER 1975 OR 1976, BUT THEIR AT-TACKS BECAME MORE AGGRESSIVE.

The Politburo's propaganda program was three-fold:

Reduce U.S. support to the RVN

Make sure the U.S. did not reenter the war.

Build up the credibility of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) as a legitimate political entity and an alternative to Thieu's government.

The central theme was that the government of Thieu did not deserve U.S. support.

And somehow the American people and the Congress bought this line completely! Congress gave a conference room to Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden for their use in promoting this Communist propaganda! Fonda and Hayden gave lectures and combined with 35 Congressional aides to form the Capital Hill Coordinating Committee whose purpose was to end all aid to RVN.

In trying to fight off the Communists in 1974, the SVNAF had a lot of equipment but were rapidly running out of spare parts and ammunition (shows value of strong logistical system). Desertions began to rise, and many senior officers fled the country with their families.

The economy began to suffer without U.S. dollars and inflation began to soar. Once again the Buddhists withdrew their support for Thieu--although this time the Catholics also abandoned him; a big loss of prestige.

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In 1974 the fight went out of the RVN leadership and the people as they realized they were doomed to military defeat and subsequent Communist takeover.

NOTE: IN THE NORTH--THROUGHOUT 1974 THE NVA STEPPED UP THEIR STRATEGIC GAME PLAN--DESIGNATED TO GET AS MUCH LAND AS POSSIBLE WHILE WATCHING CLOSELY TO SEE WHAT THE U.S. WOULD DO. AS WE DID NOTHING, WE SEE NVA TROOPS MOVE PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO SAIGON BY YEAR'S END, AS WELL AS BEING WITHIN ARTILLERY RANGE OF EVERY MAJOR CITY IN I AND II CORPS.

THESE BATTLES PROVED WITHOUT A DOUBT, THAT IN SPITE OF TERRIBLE SVNAF LOSSES, THE U.S. WOULD NOT OR COULD NOT INTERVENE.

1975: In a last-ditch effort to salvage the country Thieu decides to abandon all the land above Tuy Hoa in II Corps and try to defend the rest. The withdrawal from the Central Highland cities of Kontum and Pleiku was to be a secret--but the word got out and panic naturally followed.

Upward of 400,000 civilians and 60,000 troops tried to withdraw down a relatively unused road, pursued by the NVA. Under constant attacks and artillery barrages from the "liberating" NVA forces, only 20,000 troops survived the march to Tuy Hoa, and only about 100,000 civilians!

A similar situation occurred in the I Corps port city of Da Nang, as hundreds of thousands fled there. Remembering the massacres at Hue in both 1968 and 1972, they did not want to be captured by the advancing NVA. By 27 March, over 1.5 million refugees crowded into Da Nang. The police deserted, the soldiers were out of control, and the city came under artillery attack by NVA.

Thieu called for an evacuation by sea and thousands drowned trying to get through the surf out to the ships.

Even after all this, Thieu still thought the U.S. would send back air power.

On 21 April Thieu resigned and fled to Taiwan.

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As April came to an end the USA and USN evacuated all the remaining Americans in Saigon, along with many of the Vietnamese who had been working for them.

On 30 April the "Ho Chi Minh" campaign was successful as the Communists marched in and claimed Saigon with very little resistance. At 1130 they ran up the red banner over Independence Palace.

Cambodia and Laos fell soon afterward with millions of Cambodians dying at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

The factor which welded and focused the Communist effort throughout was the strategy of Revolutionary War. The U.S. principal vulnerability was the weakness inherent in a democracy itself--the incapacity to sustain a lengthy, unfocused, ill-defined, hard to quantify, inconclusive, televised, and bloody war far from home, for unidentified or ill-defined national objectives.

As Clausewitz says, you must know what kind of war you're in--we never did. Our leadership was poor--particularly under LBJ; the media played a large part in turning off the populace; and casualties caused us to lose our will to wage this war.

But we lost this war, not to a superior military might, but to a superior strategy. About 47,000 Americans were directly killed in this struggle, with another 10,000 attributable to accidents and disease. About 300,000 U.S. personnel were wounded. South Korea lost about 4400 personnel, Australia and New Zealand about 500, and Thailand about 400.

North Vietnamese Idiom:

When the tactics are wrong and the strategy is wrong, the war will be quickly lost.

When the tactics are right, but the strategy is wrong, battles may be won, but the war will be lost. (U.S.)

When the tactics are wrong, but the strategy is right, battles may be lost, but the war will be won. (NVA)

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When the tactics are right, and the strategy is right, the war will be won quickly.

Lessons Learned:

Philosophical Lessons: Only the government and people of a country can win a counter-insurgency in that country, the U.S. can't; particularly if the people of the country are suspect of our motives. E.g., many Vietnamese compared us to the French as just another western power interested in domination.

Military force is of only limited value by itself in counterinsurgencies. It cannot assure victory since it cannot assure the support of the people.

Before committing their nation's forces to a war, the political/civilian leaders must make their decision based upon realistic assessments not wishful thinking. We failed to determine the cost or the value of our involvement or our objectives.

"Know your enemy," in Vietnam, we didn't. We constantly underestimated and misunderstood the NVN, while overestimating the capabilities of the south's political and military segments.

The use of graduated air power responses is highly ineffective because it violates three basic principles of war: (1) Surprise, (2) Economy or Concentration of Force (3) Flexibility in Application

In fighting a limited war, congressional and public support within a democracy are of paramount importance.

Other Lessons Learned:

The media, without the possibility of federal censorship provided by a formal Congressional declaration of war, can bias the public to the detriment of military action.

Political ineptness can destroy military effectiveness. Our political leaders must set the

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national political goals and then let the military do the fighting. But shouldn't restrict them to the extent they can't do their jobs, and then suffer high, unnecessary, and undefendable casualties.

Treatment of U.S. POWs in NVN was barbaric.

Some other impacts of the Vietnam conflict:

All of Indochina is now under the control of NVN (Ho's dream a reality)

USSR now has warm-water SEA military bases.

A bloody conflict between China and Vietnam which showed many where China really stood.

Caused increased tensions within U.S.

Americans became more distrustful of their government.

Inflation

Damaged relationships between American so-ciety and mili-tary

Increased resources for the military

Made possible the development of new weapon systems

These lessons are important, for they covered the most controversial and unpopular war in our country's history--one from which we're still trying to recover. You should realize that six American Presidents involved us in this region, but none ever had the full backing of the American people and the Congress.

Are there to be other Vietnams? I think not, for each and every conflict is an entity unto itself. Vietnam was Vietnam. Our country's leaders must examine each situation based on its

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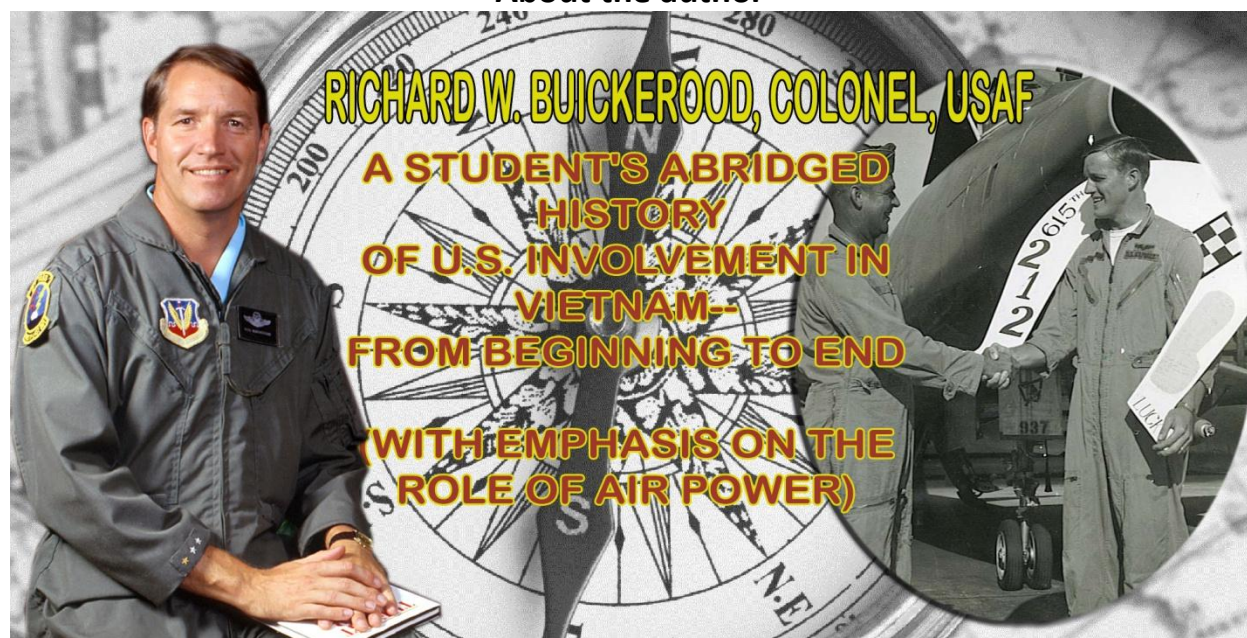
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own merits, and decide what actions are in the best interests of the nation. They must then formulate a political goal, ensure the national will of the people supports that goal, and then use every means possible short of military intervention to solve the problem. If the decision is made to use the military, then it ought to be used for a victory, not a tie or a loss.

THE END

About the author



Col. Richard Buickerood wrote this history when he was Professor of Air Science, University of Texas, Austin, teaching AFROTC. Richard is also a retired director of the Dallas Zoo. Col. Buickerood flew the hun for only one year, logging more than 200 combat missions in Viet Nam in support of ground troops. But it was a great plane to "cut your teeth on" just coming out of pilot training. It could be a fun plane, but at times it was quite unforgiving, requiring you to be vigilant, respectful, and professional at all times. The discipline required to fly this single-seat fighter set the stage for a very successful, 26 year career, flying a multitude of different aircraft. GREAT memories!! Stories about and by Rich Buickerood can be found in Phan Rang Newsletters 195, 196, 199 and 237.

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Doug's Comments:



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William Diebold, a former Phan Rang AB Photographer has this amazing web page featuring many of his Vietnam photographs as well as other life accomplishments, including two books that he has authored. Click the picture to visit.