

TOP SECRET

Chapter 23

GROUND COMBAT OPERATIONS - RVN  
JULY - DECEMBER 1965

The initial deployments of US combat troops were made before final decisions had been reached on exactly how US Marines and soldiers would be employed against the enemy. The concepts for their employment underwent close scrutiny during the ensuing months, as more and more US troops arrived in RVN, particularly with regard to whether or not the United States would assume the lion's share of the fighting and leave the pacification and security missions to the RVNAF.

The war could not wait for final resolution of this and other matters, and, in the natural course of events, hard and fast adherence to predetermined concepts was not always the case. Commanders in the field did what they had to do, insofar as their resources would allow, reacting to enemy initiatives and ARVN weaknesses with whatever tactics seemed most effective at the time.

As early as 22 April a small patrol of US Marines and RVN troops engaged in a fire fight with the VC near Da Nang. This marked the first combat encounter with the enemy by a US unit.<sup>1</sup>

During May and June as US forces arrived and deployed, Marine forces engaged in aggressive patrolling around their bases at Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Hue/Phu Bai. By 7 June there were more than 50,000 US military personnel in RVN. By late June US airborne troops were engaging in search-and-destroy missions around Bien Hoa.<sup>2</sup> On 27 June a combined US/ARVN search-and-destroy operation took place in War Zone D, involving two battalions from the 173d Airborne Brigade and two ARVN battalions, with an Australian battalion and a US battalion in reserve. On 1 July the VC attacked Da Nang air base under cover of darkness, severely damaging six USAF planes. Evidence was captured showing that the attack might have been made by a force from the NVA 325th division rather

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1. (TS-NOFORN) NMCC OPSUM 93-65, 22 Apr 65.
  2. (TS-NOFORN) NMCC OPSUM 147-65, 25 June 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

than the VC. By this time contacts between US and enemy units had increased and the trend continued into July and August. The first major battle between US and VC forces took place in mid-August at Chu Lai. Intelligence reports had indicated a force of 2,000 VC building up for an attack on the Marine base. Elements of the 4th Marine Regiment were lifted by helicopter to designated landing zones while other units landed amphibiously near Chu Lai in a maneuver designed to link up with blocking forces and cut off enemy escape routes. The operation was highly successful, with the Marines killing approximately 700 VC, confirmed by body count.<sup>3</sup>

Concept of Employment - US/FWMA/RVNAF

During visits by the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Hawaii and Saigon in July, General Westmoreland's Phase I deployment program for US forces had been presented to them along with some idea of how these forces were to be employed. The JGS, RVNAF had also briefed them on their version, prepared independently, of future operations in RVN. The gist of this briefing was that the GVN wanted to turn the highlands area over to US forces and move its own forces to the seacoast area, since GVN officials believed that their forces should be the ones to establish contact with the populace and handle the main security and pacification duties. The GVN officials wanted US Marine forces committed to search-and-destroy operations in I CTZ and the Army airmobile division sent to the Kontum, Pleiku and Phu Bon area as soon as possible. They also asked that another US infantry division be moved to RVN to operate in the Tay Ninh/Phuoc Long area, pointing out that the VC in III CTZ were defeating ARVN forces there. The whole briefing implied strongly that the US forces would have a more active role than the ARVN in fighting the enemy.<sup>4</sup>

General Westmoreland subsequently developed his concept for employing Phase I forces and the strategy, concept, and forces required for Phase II. Steps were taken to associate

3. (TS) Marine Corps Commandant's Vietnam Chronology, 1965, pp. 198-199.

4. (TS) Briefing, JGS RVNAF to SecDef et al., 17 Jul 65, Att to JCS 2343/636, 22 Jul 65, JMF 9155.3 (17 Jul 65).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

the JGS with these planning efforts to develop a campaign plan for the phased employment of US/FWMAF and RVNAF forces during the latter stages of Phase I.<sup>5</sup>

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On 27 August, in connection with their planning for deployments, the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared and forwarded to the Secretary of Defense a comprehensive set of recommendations covering US strategy in Southeast Asia, together with a statement of correlated military actions necessary to carry out this strategy. With specific reference to the war within RVN, they addressed the situation facing COMUSMACV and the RVNAF and the broad outlines of the strategies that would have to be employed. Specific major problems included the continued existence of a major VC infrastructure, both political and military; the greater growth rate of VC strength as compared to that of the ARVN; and the continued loss of LOCs, food-producing areas, and population to VC control. Insofar as the war within RVN was concerned, the basic military tasks were to cause NVN to cease directing and supporting the VC, to defeat the VC, and to extend GVN control over all of the RVN.<sup>6</sup>

The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the "US basic strategy for winning the war should include, within RVN . . . to improve the combat effectiveness of the RVNAF; build and protect bases; reduce enemy reinforcements; defeat the Viet Cong, in concert with the RVN and third country forces . . . ." <sup>7</sup>

Analyzing the enemy's current strategy in RVN, the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that the VC, directed and controlled by NVN, attempted to persuade the population to join them, using propaganda, intimidation and terror. Whenever possible, using armed assault and coercion, the VC destroyed the capability of GVN authority to govern an area, progressively reducing the GVN's ability to rally and exploit the support of the population. Once they had control of an area, the VC set up their own political organization and infrastructure.

5. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV 32361 to CINCPAC and CJCS, 17 Sep 65, JCS IN 52156.

6. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-652-65 to SecDef, 27 Aug 65, (derived from JCS 2343/646-1), JMF 9155.3 (30 Jul 65).

7. Ibid.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

Making use of local people and local logistic support, the VC organized and trained military units to attack the GVN. Usually, said the JCS, the VC sought to avoid large-scale sustained battles with the GVN and the newly arrived US forces, preferring to strike at weak spots with superior force, then "fading away" when the combat ratio turned unfavorable. The current major objective of the VC appeared to be the destruction of the RVNAF.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff also stated that to counter, successfully, the guerrilla warfare being waged by the enemy, control of the population and resources of the RVN must be seized. In RVN, the areas of greatest military significance were the Saigon area, the Mekong Delta, the coastal plain and the central highlands. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that US military action should be directed at eliminating the VC from these areas in order to provide security for the people there. The United States must build up and secure a series of bases and supporting LOCs at key localities along the coast from which offensive operations could be launched and sustained.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended to the Secretary of Defense that the principal effort of US and third country forces be to participate with the RVNAF in search-and-destroy operations while assisting the RVNAF in clearing and securing operations in support of the Rural Reconstruction effort. US/FWMAF air and ground operations should be conducted on a sustained basis, with attack and destruction of VC base areas directed at applying continuous pressure on the enemy.<sup>8</sup>

General Westmoreland issued his own concept for operations for the employment of US forces in RVN on 30 August 1965. He visualized operations by US forces in coordination with third country and the RVNAF in three phases: Phase I - commitment of US/FWMA forces necessary to halt the losing trend by the end of 1965; Phase II - resumption of the offensive by US/FWMAF during the first half of 1966 in high priority areas to destroy enemy forces and reestablish rural construction activities; Phase III - should the enemy persist, a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase II would be required for the defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas.<sup>9</sup>

8. (S-GP 4) Msg, JCS 9143 to CINCPAC, 25 Aug 65.

9. (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) CINCPAC Command History, 1965, Annex A, MACV, pp. 141-153.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

Specific military tasks to be accomplished in Phase I included: securing of major military bases, airfields and communications centers; defense of major political and population centers; offensive operations against major VC base areas to divert and destroy VC main forces; providing reserve reaction forces to prevent the loss of secure and defended areas; strengthening and preserving the RVNAF; providing adequate combat and logistic air support; maintaining an anti-infiltration screen along the coast and support forces ashore with naval gunfire and amphibious lift; providing air and sealifts as necessary to transport the minimum supplies and services to the civil population; opening necessary LOCs for essential military and civil purposes; defending, as possible, areas under effective governmental control.

During Phase II, pacification operations, which had come to a standstill, would be resumed and expanded. Those in the HOP TAC area around Saigon would receive priority. Other priority areas were the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Tri, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. In support of these actions COMUSMACV's forces would carry out offensive and clear-and-secure operations and provide reaction reserves. Detailed concepts and tasks to be performed in each CTZ for each phase were set forth.<sup>10</sup>

In mid-September, COMUSMACV reported that his planning had culminated in a schedule of operations, part of which were even then taking place. These had been approved jointly by himself and by the Chief, JGS, RVNAF. In view of the deployment planning conference scheduled to take place in Hawaii at the last of September, General Westmoreland proposed to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and to CINCPAC that he have presented there the strategy and concept for employment of Phase I and Phase II forces along with salient features of the campaign plan. Depending on how many additional forces were approved at the planning conference, he would then, in concert with the Chief, JGS, project the campaign plan forward.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Ibid.

11. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV 32361 to CINCPAC and CJCS, 17 Sep 65, JCS IN 52156.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

Also in mid-September, General Westmoreland urged his commanders to work as closely as possible with the RVNAF, to encourage them, and by example and other means, to attempt to instill in them a professional approach and competence. He admitted the difficulties of working closely in operations depending on surprise. Because of widespread subversion, safeguarding operational plans was difficult, complicating the close coordination needed when combined US/RVNAF operations were being launched. "With a minimum of coordination at the lower level," he said, "but a full and frank exchange of information with senior ARVN commanders, it will be possible on certain occasions for US troops to make the initial assault with surprise and speed. ARVN troops can be held initially in reserve until the battle begins to develop and then they may be committed under more profitable circumstances and in such a way that victory for them is more likely." He instructed his commanders to establish whenever possible a combined command post with US and ARVN personnel collocated and in some respects integrated. This would allow the US commander and his staff to have a "heavy influence" on the tactical direction of the operation in question. These combined command posts were fully justified in view of the increasing dependence of the ARVN upon US helicopter and airlift support, and more recently, artillery and naval gunfire support. General Westmoreland urged extensive exchange of liaison officers, and the placing of US forward observers and forward air controllers with the ARVN to enhance US influence and control over ARVN operations. He also suggested close tactical cooperation between the US units and the RF and PF units, pointing out that close working relationships with these paramilitary forces could produce useful intelligence, and at the same time embolden and encourage the RVN forces to face the VC more resolutely.<sup>12</sup>

On 7 October CINCPAC, replying to a JCS request of 25 August, defined the role of the US forces in Phase II operations. In his view the mission of these forces was to defeat the VC and to extend GVN control over all of RVN. If the VC operated in large formations, US forces would conduct operations with the RVNAF to find, fix, and destroy them. If the VC reverted to small operations, US forces, in cooperation with the RVNAF, would clear, secure, and pacify areas as fast

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12. (S-GP 4) Ltr, COMUSMACV to CJCS, 17 Sep 65, Att to JCS 2343/688, 27 Sep 65, JMF 9155.3 (15 Sep 65).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

as practicable. Periodic offensive operations would be conducted in VC-controlled areas by US and third country forces to destroy VC main force units and bases. All US activity would be closely coordinated with the GVN to stimulate an improved performance by the RVNAF. The US forces would help the RVNAF to defend major population centers, assist the RVNAF to regain the initiative, strengthen it, and aid the RVN in rural construction. The GVN would conduct rural construction operations with and without US military participation.<sup>13</sup>

The Secretary of State, his principal assistants, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Maxwell Taylor, now returned to private life, were briefed on COMUSMACV's Phase II program on 21 October by General DePuy, MACV J-3.

During the ensuing discussions, attention was focused upon the concept for employment of US forces as compared with the role of the RVNAF. With the exception of certain elite ARVN units, airborne Marines and some Rangers, the ARVN would be mainly employed in pacification activities behind a "fighting screen" of US forces. The US troops would carry the battle to the enemy in the war zones and other areas where VC main force units were to be found.<sup>14</sup>

Among the salient points of General DePuy's briefing on employment concepts were that US troops would be deployed to defend bases and would conduct search-and-destroy operations generally in "penny packets." US commanders would visit RF and PF units and would have troops accompany and support RF companies on operations in areas that they normally avoided. COMUSMACV campaign plans specified areas where US forces would operate each month, opening roads, conducting clearing operations, and protecting the rice harvest. DePuy noted that this technique had already served to put the ARVN back in the war. Employment of 1st Cavalry Division units on the high plateau had already freed four or five ARVN battalions to work in the populated areas of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. These ARVN forces, operating behind a screen of US units, would set the stage for pacification. US and ROK units would assist the GVN in defending all the province. An air cavalry brigade would periodically reinforce the RVNAF

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13. (TS-GP 3) Ltr, CINCPAC to JCS, 7 Oct 65, w/App A, "Concept for Vietnam," JMF 9155.3 (3 Aug 65) sec 2A.

14. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4827 to CINCPAC, 22 Oct 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

in operations against the VC in the Can Tho area. The GVN favored the concept of using their forces among the people while US forces screened against main VC units and operated on the edges of the populated areas and against the VC strongholds.<sup>15</sup>

General Taylor was particularly concerned that the GVN might be prepared to stand back and let the United States do the fighting. After hearing the briefing given by General DePuy on employment of Phase II forces, he observed that while the original concept seemed to have been for the US forces to assist the GVN, that concept seemed to have dropped out and the US ground forces were being saddled with the role of "primary doer." He questioned whether the United States was prepared to assume this preponderant ground role, while the ARVN fell back behind US units on pacification duty.<sup>16</sup>

General Wheeler asked Admiral Sharp on 22 October to clarify this, saying ". . . there is a need for us to have a clearer understanding of just what we can expect in the future from the ARVN . . . ." <sup>17</sup>

This need for a "clearer understanding" was becoming apparent in other quarters as well. The US press and other news media were devoting considerably more attention to the operations of US forces in Vietnam than to those of the RVNAF. Ambassador Lodge, in early November, expressed concern over this and recommended firm guidance from State and Defense officials to all appropriate subordinates emphasizing that the United States was not taking over the war, that the GVN had the basic and essential role, and that the US role remained that of combat support to the GVN. Secretary McNamara, agreeing with the Ambassador, informed the Services and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that, "Critical as our own operations may be it is an inescapable fact that final attainment of our goals in South Vietnam will depend to an even greater extent on effective operations by the RVNAF, which must continue to

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15. (TS) Memo, CJCS to LTG Goodpaster, 16 Nov 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

16. (TS) Memo, GEN Taylor to SecState et al., 26 Oct. 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

17. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4827 to CINCPAC, 22 Oct 65.

TOP SECRET



TOP SECRET

conduct the bulk of all actions against the VC, and on the stability and morale of the GVN as a whole." He instructed them to consider this statement as guidance within their respective areas of responsibility.<sup>18</sup>

On 2 November Admiral Sharp replied to the Chairman's query of 22 October regarding the role of the ARVN. He pointed out that there were four main types of operations in which ARVN and RF units would normally engage. These were search and destroy, clear and secure, reserve reaction, and defense of government centers. Defining these operations, CINCPAC stated:

Search and Destroy . . . are offensive operations undertaken against known or suspected VC base areas or force concentrations. These operations, often dependent on self-generated intelligence, are expected to locate and destroy VC forces or their base areas, destroying supplies, communications systems and training installations, thereby keeping the VC on the move and forcing him to reestablish in more remote areas, taking the pressure off the populated areas. . . . Clearing operations are Search and Destroy operations conducted in a well defined zone directed at destroying or permanently eliminating VC forces from that zone. They are sustained in nature and will only be undertaken when it is intended that securing forces will be assigned to the zone and the full range of pacification measures initiated. . . . Securing operations are those which provide long term security for the people in the hamlets, villages and districts, which have already been cleared of larger VC units and in which the Government is reestablishing effective control. . . . Reserve Reaction operations are designed to relieve province and district towns and units under attack. . . . Defense of government centers includes the protection of province capitals and district towns, key governmental facilities and installations. . . .<sup>19</sup>

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18. (C) Memo, SecDef to SecA et al., 3 Nov 65, Att to JCS 2343/713, 10 Nov 65, JMF 9155.3 (3 Nov 65).

19. (TS-GP 4) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 022214Z Nov 65, JCS IN 34023.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

Wherever possible, CINCPAC continued, RVN forces would be used to defend GVN installations and bases and in "Securing" operations. US forces would not engage in such operations except in areas around their own bases. While some ARVN battalions would be earmarked for "Reserve Reaction" and "Search and Destroy" operations, the bulk of the operations against VC forces and bases would be undertaken by the US/FWMA forces and the ARVN General Reserve (six airborne and six marine battalions).<sup>20</sup>

General Wheeler considered the concept provided by CINCPAC to be "at considerable variance" with that set forth by General DePuy in his briefing on 22 October.<sup>21</sup>

On 10 November, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented to the Secretary of Defense in a memorandum a concept of operations in extension and support of the earlier concept they had given him on 27 August. US and allied forces would continue to establish and expand a series of secure bases and key LOCs in localities along the seacoast and elsewhere as necessary, and would step up offensive operations launched from these and other bases to disrupt and destroy VC main force units and bases in order to assist the GVN to expand its control over the militarily and economically significant areas of Saigon, the Mekong Delta, the coastal plain, and the central highlands. This would deny principal recruiting and food-producing areas to the Viet Cong and would secure these resources to friendly control. It would increase the security of the people and obtain their increased support for the GVN. When the VC operated in large formations, US/third country and RVNAF forces would conduct operations to find, fix, and destroy them. When the VC dispersed and reverted to small-scale actions or guerrilla warfare, additional emphasis would be shifted to clearing, securing, and civic action operations. US/third country forces would conduct combat operations with primary emphasis on security of their own operating bases and LOCs, and, in conjunction with air and naval forces, would provide heavy assault strength against VC forces and bases. They would launch offensive operations to assist the RVNAF in the defense of major population centers. They would advise and assist the ARVN, conduct psychological operations, and assist in the rural construction program.

20. Ibid.

21. (TS) Memo, CJCS to LTG Goodpaster, 16 Nov 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

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The bulk of operations against VC and bases outside secure areas would be handled by US/third country and ARVN general reserve forces. The bulk of the ARVN forces would be committed to defending GVN installations and to securing operations.<sup>22</sup>

General Taylor informed Secretary McNamara and the Chairman in a memorandum on 19 November that in their "paper" the Joint Chiefs of Staff seemed to be accepting the concept of the JGS, RVNAF, that US forces should have the "primary combat role" in RVN. He pointed out that he considered this a mistake from the points of view of "GVN psychology and US domestic opinion . . . ." <sup>23</sup>

The Village Burning Incident

The tactics developed by US forces in the first months of their operations against the VC were designed to carry the fight to the enemy in the environment and under the peculiar conditions that they faced in Vietnam. Because the fighting took place in populated areas, and because the enemy took full advantage of the presence of the civilian population and the native villages and hamlets, the danger to the civilian populace was great. This was particularly true in the vicinity of Da Nang where the US Marines, in company with RVN troops, conducted operations designed to seize control of an ever-expanding area around the city and US bases there. The VC had been extremely active and controlled many of the villages there before the Marines arrived on the scene.

On 10 July 1965, the CG of the III MAF, General Walt, had issued a directive pointing out that the number of non-combatant casualties resulting from US combat operations was of growing concern throughout Vietnam and ordering great care in the use of artillery, aviation, and other weapons capable of inflicting mass casualties. Their use in populated areas would be restricted to close support missions against clearly identifiable targets. "In short," he told his troops, "the utmost discretion, judgment, and restraint must be used in the application of all fire power." "It is

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22. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-811-65 to SecDef, 10 Nov 65 (derived from JCS 2343/655-26), JMF 9155.3 (3 Aug 65) sec 5.

23. (S) Memo, GEN Taylor to SecDef and CJCS, 19 Nov 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

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not the intent of this message to infringe upon the inherent right of an individual to defend himself from hostile attack," General Walt added.<sup>24</sup>

On 3 August, a company of Marines conducted a search-and-destroy operation through the village of Cam Ne 4, south of Da Nang. They were accompanied by a Popular Force platoon of 22 men and a CBS-TV news team headed by an American. During the course of the operations, selective film was made by the TV cameramen, featuring the burning of a native dwelling and showing frightened RVN civilians. When shown on national television in the United States on 5 August, along with a highly biased commentary charging wanton destruction of native dwellings and the wounding and killing of harmless civilians, this film created adverse public reaction and brought outcries of protest against the Marines' tactics. The facts of the case were quite different from those shown by the TV report.

The village in question, Cam Ne 4, had been swept by the Marines on 12 July, at which time the place had been full of VC. Three Marines had been killed and four wounded. The village was full of caves, tunnels, and trench lines. Between houses were impenetrable hedgerows. Most of the houses in the village had access to underground tunnels far more elaborate than needed to protect the inhabitants. Many of the dwellings were not lived in. The overall nature of the place was that of a military fortification rather than a peaceful village.

When the Marines began their sweep on 3 August, they had come under heavy rifle and automatic weapons fire from the hedgerows--with three Marines being wounded. Of the 90 houses in the village, a total of 51 were burned from the effects of tracers, grenades, and 3.5 rockets. In only one case was a house deliberately burned, set afire with a cigarette lighter at the order of the company commander on the advice of the RVN district chief. It was this incident that was recorded by the TV camera. This particular house covered a concrete basement with a concrete tunnel outlet leading to a tunnel complex, and was unquestionably a tactical installation--not a peaceful dwelling. In the same operation a ten-year-old RVN boy was killed when a VC ran into the house in which the boy was hiding and was fired upon by an M-79 grenade launcher.<sup>25</sup>

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24. (C) Msg, CG FMFPAC to CMC, 070857Z Aug 65.

25. (U) Msg, COMUSMACV Telecon to NMCC, 050640Z Aug 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

As the Marines withdrew from the village at about 1500 hours, they again drew heavy fire from the same area from which they had originally been fired upon.

Operation SILVER BAYONET

With the arrival in the autumn of major US Army units, including the 1st Cavalry Division (AM) and the 1st Infantry Division, General Westmoreland expanded his attacks in the II CTZ, securing coastal areas and pushing forward along formerly VC-controlled LOCs into the highlands plateau area as earlier envisioned by General Johnson. These tactics brought increasingly strong reaction from the enemy, underscoring their effectiveness.

One of the earliest large-scale operations by the US Army forces was Operation GIBRALTAR, conducted by a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division in Binh Dinh province from 17 to 21 September. This search-and-destroy operation killed 226 VC with very light casualties to US forces.<sup>26</sup>

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An attack by the VC against a Special Forces camp at Plei Me, 25 miles southwest of Pleiku, on 19 October touched off a month-long campaign involving US, ARVN, and VC/NVA troops in the fiercest fighting to date in RVN. Following the attack, troops of the 1st Cavalry Division (AM) were ordered to provide security and artillery support to the ARVN forces around Plei Me. A reinforced brigade of the division launched search-and-destroy mission between Plei Me and the Cambodian border, killing or capturing 300 VC. On 14 November, in the Ia Drang Valley, the most significant phase of the operation began when the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, attacked VC/NVA forces, of more than division strength and fighting from well-entrenched positions. US troops fought against the numerically superior enemy, in many cases hand-to-hand, in a series of fierce small engagements which frequently found the US units cut off. Repeated enemy attempts to overrun US positions using human-wave tactics were thwarted by the skillful use of air, artillery, and armed helicopter support. B-52s were used in a tactical role and caused heavy enemy casualties. This engagement was

<sup>26</sup>. (S-NOFORN-GP 1) Rpt by CSA, Challenge: Compendium of Army Accomplishment, July 1964-April 1968, (1968), p. 6, JCS Hist Div Files. (Hereafter cited as CSA Rpt.)

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

evidently a carefully planned communist move to test the behavior and reaction time of US forces. The enemy appeared willing to sacrifice his men in order to inflict an impressive loss on US forces. The enemy lost 1,286 men in the Ia Drang Valley, the US had 217 killed and 232 wounded. In its final phase which began on 18 November, ARVN airborne troops conducted a search and destroy operation west of Pleiku, killing another 265 of the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

As SILVER BAYONET was taking place in the North, the US 1st Infantry Division was also engaged in successful operations in Bien Hoa province. Operation HUMP, a search-and-destroy mission by the Division between 5-9 November, killed 403 enemy with US losses of 50 killed.<sup>28</sup>

The Enemy Threat Increases

These military successes by US forces encouraged and heartened the RVNAF. At the same time, however, they apparently caused the enemy to build up more rapidly in order to offset the growing US capability.

During General Wheeler's visit to RVN in late November 1965, General Westmoreland emphasized the seriousness with which he viewed the VC/PAVN build-up which had taken place and which was continuing, apparently at an accelerated rate.<sup>29</sup>

US intelligence now accepted the presence in RVN of three regiments of the 325th NVA Division plus four other separate nondivisional regiments, the latest of which had arrived in mid-September. Evidence captured during the Plei Me battle in November pointed to the enemy's having formed another 325th NVA Division with cadres left by the parent unit. COMUSMACV's intelligence officer believed that one regiment of this newly constituted division was now in RVN. The two other regiments of this new division were either already in or were shortly to arrive in RVN.<sup>30</sup>

27. (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) CINCPAC Command History, 1965, Annex A, MACV, pp. 168-169.

28. (S-NOFORN-GP 1) CSA Rpt, p. 7.

29. (TS) Msg, MAC 6020 (CJCS) to CSA, 29 Nov 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

30. (S-NOFORN) Msg, MAC 6016 to DIA, 28 Nov 66, CJCS 091 Vietnam Nov 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

A regiment of the 304th NVA Division had been encountered at Plei Me. Reportedly, it had brought 120mm mortars into RVN, the first occasion on which these effective weapons had been introduced. All this evidence, if true, meant that NVN had nine regiments in RVN. Most disturbing to the US command was the increasing rate of NVA infiltration. There was growing evidence that as many as 12 battalions were now entering RVN each month. At the same time the infiltration of NVN cadre personnel for political, economic, and military organizations was continuing, supporting the formation of new VC units in RVN. US intelligence now accepted 83 VC battalions plus 27 NVA battalions for a total of 110 enemy battalions in the RVN. The VC controlled a manpower pool of 526,000 physically fit males between the ages of 16 and 45. They could form at least two new battalions each month and train at least 2,500 replacements, equating to five battalions. Taking into consideration training and infiltration capabilities and losses, the MACV J-2 believed that the enemy could have a force equivalent to 155 battalions in RVN by the end of 1966.

The enemy's ability to supply and maintain his forces in RVN was also examined by the MACV J-2 at this time. He estimated that NVN could move 300 tons per day from NVN through Laos into RVN during dry weather, this figure dropping to about 50 tons a day in the normal five months rainy season. The net result was an average daily year-round figure of 195 tons per day through Laos. Substantial support was also moved into RVN by way of Cambodia, believed to amount to a minimum of 25 tons per day. The total LOC capacity through Laos and Cambodia and by sea was given as a minimum 234 tons per day. Enemy forces then in RVN would, under light combat conditions, require only 84 tons per day.

Analyzing the enemy's strategy, the US intelligence officials believed that the enemy counted on a long war during which they would exact the maximum attrition on allied and, especially, US forces. They would avoid combat unless they could expect victory. They would try to keep a force ratio in their favor by conducting holding attacks against US bases as well as diversionary attacks to disperse US/FWMA/RVNAF forces and would attack simultaneously at widespread locations. They would attack US base areas in order to tie down security forces and to destroy aircraft, equipment, and supplies. They would mount attacks designed to cause the commitment of US general reserves. They would attack isolated units to inflict heavy losses. They would continue trying to dominate the highlands to secure their own base areas at the end of the Laos

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

infiltration routes. They would keep continuing pressure on LOCs to terrorize areas under GVN control and to weaken the will of their population. The enemy would defend his own major bases because in order to fight a protracted war he would need the stockpiles of supplies he had built up in these bases over the years.

"Although the enemy has great capabilities he also has significant vulnerabilities," the MACV J-2 stated. "He must defend his logistic base areas, and his long logistical LOC is susceptible to interdiction. He is especially vulnerable to air and artillery attack, sustained combat operations, and aggressive pursuit. Additionally, he is dependent upon the support of the local population."

The DIA agreed in most part with the evaluation of the enemy by the MACV J-2. The tactics attributed to the enemy were considered by the DIA to be a "logical acceleration" of guerrilla warfare and represented tactics that had been employed by the VC, for example, in such recent engagements as Plei Me and the Ia Drang Valley. The concept, which the MACV J-2 termed "Strategic Mobility," had the objective of amassing sufficient numbers of maneuver battalions to pose a threat in widely separated areas, thus tying down large numbers of the friendly forces in static, defensive missions and allowing the enemy to destroy selected targets at times and places of his own choosing. DIA pointed out that the Viet Minh had followed these tactics successfully against the French. The only areas in which DIA did not completely agree with the MACV estimate were in enemy logistic requirements, which DIA set at 125 tons daily as opposed to the MACV figure of 84 tons, and the enemy capability to move into RVN at 214 tons a day as opposed to the MACV estimate of 234 tons per day.<sup>31</sup>

US intelligence officials estimated in December that VC strength had risen to 215,000--75,000 regular forces and regional troops, 100,000 guerrillas, and 40,000 support troops and political workers. This represented, despite heavy casualties, a net gain of approximately 50,000 since March 1965. Intelligence estimates placed the number of NVN regulars in RVN in December at 26,000.<sup>32</sup>

31. (S-GP 1) Memo, Dir, DIA to D/JS, S-3589 AP-2F, 17 Dec 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Dec 65.

32. (S-GP 1) DIA SIS-141-66, Jan 66, p. v, 9. NY Times 5 Dec 65, IV, 1; 27 Jan 66, 2.

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US military operations against the VC in late 1965 continued to be effective despite the enemy's increasing numbers. A highly successful search-and-destroy operation, BUSHMASTER II, was carried out by four battalions of the 1st Infantry Division between 28 November and 9 December in Binh Duong province. This operation, which destroyed enemy units and facilities in a VC base area, killed almost 300 VC and resulted in the destruction of a weapons factory and ammunition. US losses were 37 killed and 116 wounded.33

*Army*

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33. (S-NOFORN-GF 1) CSA Rpt, p. 7.

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