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TITLE: The United States Army's Air Mobility Concept during the IA Drang Campaign: Setting the Stage for the Body Count Strategy in Vietnam

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Title: The United States Army's Air Mobility Concept during the Ia Drang Campaign: Setting the Stage for the Body Count Strategy in Vietnam

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Thesis: The initial successes of the US Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) against the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in the Ia Drang River valley were implemented through a series of deliberate assaults based on accurate intelligence of enemy movements. The speed and maneuverability of helicopter air mobility would achieve surprise in the Ia Drang and the concept would eventually morph into a misunderstood interpretation of how to fight the tactical and operational levels of war in Vietnam. Despite this new concept of maneuverability in warfare, the air mobility concept at LZ X-Ray in the Ia Drang would serve as a deciding factor for the flawed body count strategy implemented by General William Westmoreland in Vietnam.

Discussion: The Ia Drang Campaign was the first major conventional battle between the US Army and the PAVN during the Vietnam War in November 1965. The campaign, known as Operation SILVER BAYONET would prove concepts which would shape how both the Americans and PAVN would conduct the remainder of the war. The fighting during the Ia Drang Campaign consisted predominately of three major engagements and several skirmishes. Although the campaign was only conducted just over a month long period, the lessons from the campaign would be major deciding factors towards a strategy of measuring progress through enemy body count.

The Battle of LZ X-Ray was the culminating event of the campaign. Outnumbered eight to one, the Americans produced a significant PAVN body through use of supporting indirect fire assets and close air support. However, the intelligence the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry received on the Ia Drang River Valley was flawed and their ability to mass forces on the objective proved difficult. The battalion fought for their lives to prevent being overrun for three straight days. The battle was viewed as a success by US military and civilian leaders. The result was the decision to conduct a conventional warfare strategy, initially through air mobility, which depended on the enemy body count as a metric of success.

Conclusion: The American victory at LZ X-Ray was the defining moment of the Ia Drang campaign and the results would be the answer to the United States' new body count strategy in Vietnam. Despite the victory at LZ X-Ray, the air mobility concept's first true test had many flaws. Initially, the relief of the Special Forces camp at Plei Me was a text book air mobility assault in the rear of the PAVN. The 1st Cavalry drove the PAVN from Plei Me and nearly succeeded in cutting off PAVN elements from their parent unit. However, at LZ X-Ray the Americans landed in a PAVN regimental defensive position where the PAVN occupied the high ground. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry was nearly overrun several times and an awesome amount of artillery and close air support missions were conducted to keep the unit from annihilation. The B-52, a strategic asset, was also used for tactical strikes in support of 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry and was one of the deciding factors the unit survived. After Ia Drang, overwhelming firepower was seen as the key to victory in Vietnam.

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The United States Army's Air Mobility Concept during the Ia Drang Campaign: Setting the Stage for the Body Count Strategy in Vietnam

*"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."*¹ - Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

*"Human life is cheap to the Asian. They don't feel the same way about death that we do."*² – General William Westmoreland, Commander United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965-1968

The Ia Drang Campaign was the first major conventional battle between the US Army and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) during the Vietnam War in November 1965. The results of the campaign, dedicated Operation SILVER BAYONET, shaped how both militaries conducted the remainder of the war. The fighting during the Ia Drang Campaign consisted predominately of three major engagements and numerous skirmishes. Although the campaign was conducted over a month, the lessons from the campaign would be major deciding factors in a flawed US strategy body count strategy implemented by General William Westmoreland as a metric of success in Vietnam.

The initial success of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) against the PAVN in the Ia Drang River valley was implemented by several deliberate assaults based on intelligence of perceived enemy movements and positions. The speed and maneuverability of helicopter air mobility would achieve surprise in the Ia Drang and the concept would morph into a misunderstood interpretation of the tactical and operational situation in Vietnam. Despite this

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 88-89.

² William Westmoreland, "Interview with William Westmoreland," directed by Peter Davis, documentary *Hearts and Minds*, 1974.

new concept of maneuverability in warfare, the air mobility concept in the Ia Drang would serve as the means for a flawed body count concept implemented by General William Westmoreland.

The paper will cover the history of the United States' initial involvement in Vietnam, the development of the air mobility concept, and the conduct of the Ia Drang Campaign (PAVN Plei Me Campaign) from the American and North Vietnamese perspectives. The paper will also discuss how the outcome of the Ia Drang Campaign and the lessons learned eventually contributed to the United States' strategic defeat in Vietnam. This paper will discuss several major points on America's air mobility concept and how the concept was misinterpreted by Army leaders in future operations.

Background

Prior to 1950, the United States was a neutral towards France's interests in Indochina. Following the defeat of the Chinese Nationalist in China to communist Mao Zedong's forces in 1949, the United States began to take a larger interest in French Indochina. The outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 also changed the US' national security strategy in Asia.

Between 1950 and 1954, the United States provided nearly four hundred military advisors and significant military aid to the French in Indochina³. As the war progressed, the French and the US advisors failed to understand the nature of the war against the Vietminh. The conventional war the French implemented failed to defeat the guerilla warfare aspect of the conflict. The French also failed to understand the enemy's command and control structure and procedures. The French mistake in adapting to their enemy allowed the Vietminh to mass their guerilla units on secluded French combat outposts and key installations.

³ Andrew F. Krepinivich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 18.

When the French base at Dien Bin Phu was surrounded and sieged by the Vietminh in 1954, the French desperately requested additional military support from the United States⁴. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) weighed the options for providing significant ground forces to assist the French. The JCS also discussed the possibility of tactically employing nuclear weapons during French offensive operations. The JCS also suspected the Chinese were supplying the Viet Minh with weapons and advisors. The JCS began planning possible interdiction operations around the borders of China. After consideration, the initial option of deploying US ground forces to French Indochina was rejected. The option would take too much manpower away from the war in Korea. Not wanting to escalate US presence in Indochina further, President Eisenhower decided against further assistance in Indochina and left the French on their own. Shortly after the president's decision, Dien Bin Phu fell to the Viet Minh⁵. The loss would shake France's will to maintain hold over Indochina and would eventually lead to France's decision to discuss terms of peace with the Vietminh⁶ at the Geneva Accords.

Following the Geneva Accords peace talks between France and Vietnam, the United States began to take a larger role providing diplomacy to South Vietnamese politicians and advising the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The Geneva Accords agreement divided Vietnam into the North and South and also established the countries of Laos and Cambodia. Prior to France's departure from South Vietnam in April 1956, France and the United States agreed on a combined training mission, known as the Training Relations and Instructions Mission (TRIM)⁷. The purpose of TRIM was to establish a large South Vietnamese conventional force capable of repelling an attack from the North Vietnamese. The American

⁴ Krepinevich, Jr., 18

⁵ Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Ltd, 1993), 156.

⁶ Krepinevich, Jr., 19

⁷ Krepinevich, Jr., 21

advisors insisted on large exercises with regiments and divisions for the training, but the South Vietnamese were used to small unit tactics in training and combat. The conventional warfare training the advisors provided the ARVN did not prepare them to fight a Vietcong insurgency. The operational environment of South Vietnam was an unconventional, guerilla warfare environment coupled with significant political problems. To complicate matters even more, the US Army advisors did not have Vietnamese linguists or Vietnamese cultural training prior to deploying. The United States' cultural ignorance of the Vietnamese people would also contribute to the United States' failures to understand the nature of the war they were waging or the South Vietnamese people whose hearts and minds they would eventually attempt to win⁸.

Air Mobility

The idea for the air mobility concept began in the mid-1950. Restructuring and experimenting with new concepts were the Army's priorities to remain relevant during post Korean War defense budget cuts. The air mobility concept was formed as a conventional concept that would enable the concentration or dispersion of troops for delaying operations against the Soviet Army Divisions during a nuclear war in Europe. The concept gained positive traction in 1954 when US Army Lieutenant General James Gavin wrote the article "Cavalry, and I Don't Mean Horses" in *Harpers Magazine*⁹. The article promoted helicopters and light fixed-wing aircraft for use in landing air cavalry behind enemy lines for offensive operations and for screening the maneuver of friendly forces during offensive operations. The concept began to take on serious development in the late 1950s.

⁸Krepinevich, Jr., 23

⁹Major General James M. Gavin, "Cavalry, and I Don't Mean Horses", *Harpers Weekly*, April 1954, 54-60, <http://www.combatreform.org/cavalryandidontmeanhorses.htm>

In 1960, the Army convened a board to identify the requirements for aircraft supporting air mobility. The Rogers Board, named after the ranking officer on the board General Gordon B. Rodgers, Deputy Commander of the Continental Army Command, identified aircraft for three different missions. The missions were identified as observation, surveillance, and transport aircraft and required new helicopters to satisfy mission needs¹⁰. Other recommendations for the board included procuring new aircraft every ten years and experimentation exercises for air mobility. The Rogers board mainly provided guidance for procurement of aircraft and manpower planning, but not the proof of concept of air mobility¹¹. A proponent of the air mobility concept, 101st Airborne Division Commander Lieutenant General William Westmoreland formed the 101st Airborne Aviation Battalion (provisional) to begin experimentation.

In the administration, both President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had been advocates of air mobility and counter-guerilla helicopter operations during Kennedy's first year in office in 1961¹². Both men believed the air mobility concept had the greatest ability to successfully mass forces and firepower on guerillas in restricted terrain by use of speed and surprise. The concept would be beneficial to the spreading, low to mid intensity counter-insurgency conflict in South Vietnam if the United States were inclined to escalate involvement. The US Army did not initially view air mobility warfare in the same manner as the President or Secretary of Defense. For the Army, air mobility was being developed for delaying operations on the nuclear battlefield of Europe. From the beginning, air mobility was developed

¹⁰ Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: Airmobility 1961-1971*, 1999, Washington D.C. 8

¹¹ Department of the Army 8

¹² Krepinevich, Jr. 115

as a conventional capability by the Army. This method of warfare and conventional mindset would continue throughout air mobility's employment in Vietnam.

In 1961, the first US Army helicopters deployed to South Vietnam in support of ARVN operations against the Vietcong. The helicopter proved effective in counter-guerilla operations, creating speed and achieving surprise during offensive operations. In Washington DC, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had become impatient with the US Army's minimal progress developing the air mobility concept development. In a memorandum to Secretary of the Army Cyrus Vance, McNamara called for a reexamination of requirements for Army aviation including analyses and field exercises "to evaluate revolutionary new concepts of tactical mobility and recommend action to give the Army the maximum attainable mobility in the combat area"¹³. Through McNamara and his staff's interest in air mobility, along with the revolutionary thinking Army aviators working for the Secretary of Defense, support for the air mobility concept began to gain traction¹⁴.

As the Army continued to stall progress on the air mobility concept development, other air mobile advocates in the Army began to call for a drastic change in Army doctrine and culture. One known advocate, General Robert R. Williams, who served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) at the time, persuaded civilian analysts in OSD to apply pressure on the Army with regards to air mobility and Army aviation requirements¹⁵. The tactic, although angering the Army's conventionally-minded general officer corps, was successful in attracting Secretary McNamara's attention and endorsement. In response to McNamara's memorandum and General Williams' lobbying, the Army began to take more decisive action on the air mobility concept.

¹³ Robert S, McNamara, Secretary of Defense, United States Department of Defense. Secretary of Defense to Secretary of the Army. Memorandum, April 19, 1962.

¹⁴ Department of the Army 18

¹⁵ Krepinevich, Jr. 119

In 1961 General Hamilton H. Howze was appointed as the president of the US Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board by Secretary McNamara. General Howze's focus during the board was to keep air mobility relevant to the Army's conventional mission and a possible conflict in South Vietnam by developing the concept for mid to high intensity conflict. The concept sought to satisfy both the Army and the administration by becoming an increasingly versatile force capable of several mission sets.

The primary purpose of the Howze Board was to establish and supervise air mobility practical exercises to prove concepts. The tests were supported by Army schools Field Test Group and elements of the 82d Airborne Division. The test program aircraft logged over 11,000 flight hours, flying mostly at low altitude and without air traffic control¹⁶. The exercises the group conducted consisted of three realistic combat scenarios. The first scenario was conducted at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and focused on air mobility in support of counter guerilla operations.

The second training scenario consisted of delay and withdraw operations simulating a 1950 Pusan Perimeter type scenario. The third scenario of the exercise would prove the air mobility concept later used in Vietnam. In the scenario, a helicopter-lifted infantry company landed behind enemy forces and conducted a successful surprise attack. The movement and attack over rugged terrain took four hours from lift off to completion. Without helicopter mobility, the foot movement and attack would have taken approximately twenty-four hours¹⁷. Other experimentation by the group consisted of using helicopters as fire support platforms in

¹⁶ J. A. Stockfisch, "The 1962 Howze Board and Army Combat Developments," (Santa Monica: Arroya Center), 1962.

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¹⁷ Stockfisch 16

forward areas where the air cavalry would possibly operate beyond the range of indirect fire support weapons.

The Howze Board concluded with a list of recommendations for personnel and equipment allotments and structure. Of note, the board recommended the following air mobile organization:

1. The Air Assault Division would have 459 organic aircraft to provide one-third lift for division's infantry. The rifle companies would have no vehicles and only direct fire weapons with the heavy weapons being controlled at the battalion level.
2. The Air Cavalry Combat Brigade would consist of 316 organic aircraft with 144 of those aircraft being attack helicopters (UH-1B). Equipped with anti-armor weapons, the brigade could be used against Soviet armor in Europe and counter-insurgency operations in Southeast Asia. The organic aircraft would be able to lift the brigades 2,562 troops in one lift.
3. The Corps Aviation Brigade would provide lift for three infantry battalions or one 105mm artillery battalion. The brigade would also serve as a reconnaissance and general support element.
4. The Army Aviation Brigade would have the same abilities as the Corps Aviation Brigade but would be tailored to conventional operations against the Soviets in Europe.
5. The Airmobile Corps Artillery would consist of 159 helicopters for fire support and transport and four fixed wing aircraft for reconnaissance. The artillery would consist of 105mm artillery and an assortment of indirect fire rockets.
6. The Special Warfare Aviation Brigade would consist of 120 aircraft structured into five elements available to support Special Operations troops.

7. The Air Transport Brigade would consist of 80 fixed wing cargo aircraft and 41 heavy lift helicopters. The brigade would be able to provide limited logistical support to a division within a 175 mile range.
8. The Air Ambulance Battalions would provide battlefield casualty evacuation.
9. Aviation Augmentation of Other Units concept was established to provide helicopter support to regular infantry and armor units¹⁸.

The Howze Board had convened during an inter-service rivalry over aviation between the US Army and the US Air Force over the role of close air support (CAS) responsibilities. The Air Force was threatened by the air mobility concept and other Army experimentations with propeller and jet driven fixed wing aircraft. The Air Force wanted to maintain its role as the Army's primary CAS agency. The tension between the two services would eventually be reconciled through the implementation of the United States Strike Command (STRICOM).

The purpose of the US STRICOM was to establish a flexible, general purpose, strategy-tailored force able to respond to any crisis throughout the world¹⁹. The force consisted of eight Reorganization Objective Army Divisions (ROAD) supported by a sufficient amount of Air Force airpower for CAS and airlift capabilities. The force had three possible mission sets; the reinforcement of other forward commands, contingency operations, and the conduct of general operations in the Middle East and Africa. The concept realigned the Army and the Air Force to their World War II mission sets and eased the tensions of competing for resources between the two services. The force also was structured to support President Kennedy's Flexible Response strategy and would eventually form the first elements of the future air cavalry division. Flexible

¹⁸ Stockfische 22-23

¹⁹ Krepinevich, Jr. 117

Response was Kennedy's "consideration of all non-nuclear options in the event of war, and it aimed to foster an institutional avoidance of nuclear options for retaliation²⁰".

Restructuring the Army

The US Army's reorganization priorities post Korean War had the heavy armor and mechanized divisions. The purpose was to focus on structuring a heavy force able to compete in a possible ground war against the Soviet Union in Europe. Air mobility, along with the creation of the Special Forces, threatened the Army's conventional forces budget and was not initially accepted by most of the general officers within the Army. For the proponents of air mobility within the US Army they offered an olive branch, suggesting air mobility's primary mission to support a conventional war in Europe. Air mobility's secondary mission would be a form of a technical solution to the ARVN's failures to counter guerillas in South Vietnam²¹.

The 11th Air Assault Division was activated under commander Brigadier General Harry Kinnard in February 1964 as the United States' involvement in the war in South Vietnam began to escalate. The air mobility concept maintained conventional aspects and aimed to achieve massed forces on the enemy through rapid execution and speed, supporting arms, and was followed by a timely withdrawal²². Through several exercises, the unit proved the air mobility concept's maneuverability, mobility, and ability to be tactically decisive. Search and destroy tactics were developed by massing air cavalry forces in the enemy's rear area and employing indirect fire assets and Air Force CAS support for decisive victory.

²⁰ Samuel Joseph Kessler, "From 'Massive Retaliation' to Flexible Response': Robert McNamara at the Pentagon" (contribution, Journal of Politics and International Affairs, 2010), http://www.nyu.edu/clubs/jpia.club/PDF/S10_Kessler.pdf

²¹ Krepinevich, Jr. 118

²² Krepinevich, Jr. 125

Conventional tactics were predominately used during the exercises with the exception of one battalion conducting counter insurgency. The counter insurgency tactics used by the air cavalry battalion amounted to finding, fixing, and finishing the guerillas. Once again, counter insurgency training was conducted to satisfy OSD and not taken seriously by the Army. The Army's opinion remained that air mobility would support conventional operations, not counter insurgency. As a compromise, Army air mobility advocates saw air mobility as a way to maintain conventional capabilities while satisfying the Kennedy Administration's need to address counter insurgency and low to mid intensity conflict.

Air Mobility's Critical Proof of Concept: Vietnam

By the end of 1964, the ARVN forces were losing the counter insurgency fight in South Vietnam. On December 4, 1964, South Vietnamese conducted offensive operations to retake the village of Binh Gia approximately forty miles southeast of Saigon. The village had been occupied by the Viet Cong during a recent offensive in the area. The Battle of Binh Gia lasted approximately one week and resulted in a costly ARVN victory. The Viet Cong had withdrawn from the village after only suffering minimal casualties. Over two hundred ARVN troops were killed and approximately three hundred were wounded or missing. Five US advisors were killed²³. The battle was similar to past ARVN operations and the human and material toll for such small gains had begun to convince President Johnson and his staff the ARVN could not win the war without the commitment of US ground forces.

Following his 1964 Presidential election victory, President Johnson decided it was the correct time to escalate the United States' involvement in Vietnam with the introduction of

²³ History.com Staff, "South Vietnamese Win Costly Battle at Binh Gia, *History.com*, 2009. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/south-vietnamese-win-costly-battle-at-binh-gia>

ground forces. Initial offers of ground forces by President Johnson were denied by US Ambassador for the Republic of Vietnam Maxwell Taylor. Taylor believed the ARVN had the troops and equipment to defeat the insurgency; the ARVN just needed the motivation and confidence. If the US advisory effort could not motivate the ARVN forces, Taylor thought, additional US forces could not either. The rebuke irritated Johnson and he was surprised Taylor would not accept additional military assistance as the conflict escalated²⁴.

The Joint Chiefs remained dubious to the proposed increased United States presence in South Vietnam. To sweeten the pot in persuading the Joint Chiefs to support Johnson's escalation of forces in South Vietnam, McNamara informed the Chiefs unlimited funding would be provided for RVN support. Recent military budget and program cuts threatened stability within the services and created a hostile competition for resources. With the promise of an unlimited budgeting, the Army went all in and supported escalation.

As more US commitments were made to support the RVN, initial deployment rotations were made. In order to persuade Ambassador Taylor to accept ground forces deployments, the Johnson Administration stated the initial deployments were to deter any Chinese involvement and to secure airfields used by US military aircraft supporting ARVN operations and air strikes in North Vietnam. Taylor had already accepted the deployment of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) to support enclave operations near Da Nang. The Marines would relieve regional South Vietnamese forces in order to support counter insurgency operations further south near Saigon. Taylor remained committed to the counter insurgency fight but remained skeptical

²⁴ Krepinevich 135

about any additional deployments of ground forces for direct conventional combat operations²⁵.

On 4 March, 1965, the following troop deployments were approved:

1. (9) Tactical Fighter Squadrons
2. (30) B-52 Strategic Bombers to be based in Guam
3. (1) MAB based in and around Da Nang
4. On alert: 173d Airborne Division and the 25th Infantry Division

As force deployments increased, Taylor had begun to understand that escalation was what the President wanted and General William Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, would be given what he needed to win the war. Taylor also understood the weakness of ARVN forces and the political instability of the South Vietnamese government. In order to secure the country and bolster the ARVN, General Westmoreland's strategy focused on attrition of the enemy, pacification of the population, and training and advising the ARVN. As US troop levels increased, the ARVN became less of a major player in offensive operations and were emasculated to mainly guarding infrastructure and bases²⁶.

General Westmoreland's focus on the enemy was twofold; the United States needed to secure the entire country of South Vietnam from outside organized forces penetration and defeat the mounting insurgency²⁷. Being presented with two different types of war and the inconsistencies of the political and military situation in each South Vietnamese province, Westmoreland struggled to find a coherent, effective strategy suitable for all situations. The 1st

²⁵ Krepinevich 138

²⁶ Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 91.

²⁷ Krepinevich 154-155

Air Cavalry's actions during the Ia Drang Campaign in the fall of 1965 would bring more clarity to the United States' military strategy in Vietnam.

In April 1965, Secretary McNamara directed the 11th Air Assault Division's to be formally organized into the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) with an expected deployment to South Vietnam by September 1, 1965²⁸. Once deployed to Vietnam, the division initially conducted screening operations along the Cambodian Border from An Khe in the Central Highlands. The division also kept Highway 19, a vital line of communication from Pleiku to the coastline, open and safeguarded²⁹. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was the first complete division deployed to the South Vietnam and was placed in the Central Highlands to deter the PAVN infiltration threat. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), still in its infancy, adapted to the mountainous terrain of the Central Highlands through trial and error in an attempt to tailor the air mobility concept into the South Vietnam landscape. The division experimented with new techniques and distributed formations to increase combat effectiveness during offensive operations³⁰.

The Central Highlands in South Vietnam was considered an infiltration route by the PAVN and also was suspected by US intelligence to potentially serve as a PAVN support base for possible attacks further south towards Saigon. In October 1965, the PAVN had one goal for their Plei Me Campaign in the Central Highlands; find and destroy American Army units.

²⁸ Krepinivich 155

²⁹ Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 95.

³⁰ Daddis 95

The PAVN's Plei Me Campaign in the Central highlands was developed into the following three phases³¹ :

1. Phase one would be the encirclement and attack on the US Special Forces camp at Plei Me. The attack would prompt the ARVN reaction forces to relieve the Special Forces camp and be ambushed and destroyed by the 320th NVA Regiment along the route. The continuation of pressure on the Special Forces camp at Plei Me by the PAVN would invoke a strong military response from the American Army and would set the stage for the second phase of the operation.
2. Phase two would begin by luring the Americans into a major combat engagement in the Central Highlands at a time and place of the PAVN's choosing.
3. The third and final phase would be the PAVN's decimation of approximately six US Army companies in order to create American domestic disapproval of the war.

The PAVN's sole purpose in infiltrating into South Vietnam and operating in the Central Highlands was to inflict casualties on the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) out of An Khe and study American tactics in order for the PAVN to be successful in future engagements. The campaign was nested in the enemy's long term military strategy; establish political and guerilla capabilities in the South, conduct strategic mobility from established bases, and eliminate opposing forces with large scale attacks³².

The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) intelligence analysis had interpreted the PAVN's infiltration into South Vietnam as an establishment of a safe haven in the Central Highlands for

³¹ Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War against the U.S., 1965-1966*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press). 91.

³² U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1969), 19.

refitting units conducting offensive operations on Saigon. The US Army's operational plan in reaction to the PAVN infiltration south had the same purpose the PAVN plan had; find and destroy the enemy. In response to the PAVN attacks on the Special Forces camp at Plei Me, the US and ARVN Forces launched Operation SILVER BAYONET, a search and destroy operation designed to relieve the defenders at Plei Me and pursue the PAVN in vicinity of the Ia Drang River Valley³³.

The PAVN campaign began on the evening of October 19, 1965 with the siege of the Special Forces camp at Plei Me by the 33d North Vietnamese Army Regiment³⁴. The 33d endured punishing airstrikes by the United States and in four days ambushed the expected ARVN reaction force in route to relieve the camp. Once again, the 33d weathered devastating air strikes and a surprise air assault to their rear position by the 1st Cavalry. The PAVN Commander of the Plei Me Campaign, Major General Chu Huy Man, eventually ordered a hasty withdrawal of his forces from Plei Me. Over the next several weeks, small engagements between the PAVN forces and the 1st Air Cavalry occurred. On November 14, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), reinforced, inserted into a helicopter landing zone (LZ) designated X-Ray (X)³⁵. Initially surprising the PAVN forces refitting in the Ia Drang River Valley in vicinity of LZ X-Ray, the epic, bloody battle lasted three days and the result was the first significant battle and combat losses on both sides.

At LZ X-Ray, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry fought a defensive battle the moment they landed. Within two hours of securing the LZ for follow on forces, the elements of the battalion were heavily engaged with a PAVN force of approximately two companies in size. The intense

³³ U.S. Department of Defense 18

³⁴ Wilkins 92

³⁵ Wilkins 92

fire around the perimeter and the PAVN mortar fire on the LZ initially delayed the remainder of the battalion from inserting. Once the initial assault of the PAVN forces was repelled, the remainder of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry and a company from the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry landed and assumed positions on the perimeter³⁶. For the next two days, reinforced battalion's main goal was to prevent being overrun by the PAVN forces.

The intensity and brutality of the fighting increased throughout the battle. Indirect artillery fire, Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA), and CAS kept the American perimeter intact. Most of this support was employed at danger close distances, approximately within fifty to one hundred meters of friendly troops. The PAVN attacks were in strengths of fifty to over one hundred soldiers and attempted to penetrate and overrun the American defensive positions. On the afternoon of 15 November, General Kinnard inserted elements of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry and 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry into adjacent LZs to support the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry at LZ X-Ray³⁷.

The Americans developed their tactics and methods of weapons employment against the PAVN forces at LZ X-Ray mostly through improvisation. Along with danger close fire support mostly conducted by “walking” the fires in close to the American positions, and “spraying” tactics with small arms fire to draw enemy fire worked effectively during breaks in the PAVN assaults. The use of light anti-armor rockets (LAW) were effective against PAVN forces concealed in spider holes and behind tall ant hills. The M-79 grenade launcher killed many snipers hiding in trees and the use of white phosphorous confused and disoriented the PAVN, sometimes drawing them into the open and into range of the US forces' small weapons fire.

³⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore, *After Action Report, IA DRANG Valley Operation 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry 14 16 November 1965*, (San Francisco, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Commanding Officer, 1965) 7-8.

³⁷ Moore 9-15

Other techniques included indirect harassing and interdicting fires (H and I) followed by reconnaissance forces probing PAVN positions³⁸.

The intense fighting, often hand to hand, resulted in approximately twelve hundred PAVN soldiers killed and wounded. The Americans suffered seventy-nine killed in action and one hundred twenty one wounded during the three day fight. The battle at LZ-Xray, along with the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry's additional bloody battle at LZ-Albany, served as the culminating point for the campaign and proved concepts and lessons for both the US and PAVN forces.³⁹.

General William Westmoreland was pleased with the perceived success of the air mobility concept in the Ia Drang River Valley. The American's surprise assault and insert at LZ X-Ray allowed the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Commander Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore to secure the LZ and establish an initial defensive position while gradually inserting the remainder of the battalion. The speed and surprise was critical in allowing the rest of the unit to insert as the PAVN counter attacked the frail defensive perimeter. Air mobility also provided outstanding logistics support at LZ-Xray. By evacuating casualties, inserting replacements, and delivering ammunition and water, the helicopter was the essential lifeline for the unit's survival against overwhelming odds.

The PAVN forces' initial "Dau Tranh" strategy (translation "struggle movement") had failed during the siege of the Plei Me Special Forces camp. Prior to the campaign, Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap had developed two tactics to combat the American's use of helicopter mobile operations and firepower. The first method was to conduct medium size attacks on key US targets to include headquarters buildings and other military infrastructure. The second tactic

³⁸ Moore 18-21

³⁹ Moore 17-18

was to conduct small scale, uncoordinated penetration attacks known “gnat swarms”. The gnat swarm technique was designed to pin down US forces, inflict casualties, and cause anxiety and uncertainty. Following the sequential implementation of these two methods, both methods were combined for a massive assault on US forces in an effort to overrun their position and decimate forces⁴⁰

Although his forces did not overrun the American’s position, Giap’s two techniques had proven the PAVN offensive concepts during the battle at LZ X-Ray and were very effective in the attrition of the enemy. The gnat swarm technique, although producing a high PAVN casualty rate as well, proved highly effective in closing the gap where US direct fire, indirect fire, and CAS would be useless due to possible fratricide. Hand to hand combat between the two forces was not uncommon. Following the gnat swarms, PAVN soldiers would execute any living American wounded and withdraw to conduct another assault. Throughout most of the battle, a US platoon from Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry was cut off from its company after multiple gnat swarm attacks.

The aftermath of the Ia Drang Campaign left little doubt in General Westmoreland’s mind that attrition warfare through air mobility was the strategy to continue in Vietnam. During the Honolulu Conference in January 1966, American and South Vietnamese leaders met to become familiar with their counterparts and discuss non-military projects in South Vietnam⁴¹. The Joint Chiefs, Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), and General Westmoreland also met with Secretary McNamara to discuss courses of action for deploying additional forces to South Vietnam. The plans discussed several deployment options to include lengthening tours in

⁴⁰ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986). 226.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Defense 28-33

Vietnam and activating the reserves⁴². General Westmoreland's request for additional combat elements for deployment to Vietnam went from eighty battalions to one hundred twenty battalions. By the end of 1966, the proposed number of American and multi-national forces were approximately four hundred twenty nine thousand. Eventually, the reserves were not considered for activation or for augmenting forces in South Vietnam. The escalation had begun; the more troops in country, the higher the enemy body count. Westmoreland's attrition strategy was thought to be on course to win the war within the next several years.

Conclusion: Positive and Negative Results of Air Mobility during Ia Drang

"You are doing more in your helicopters to prevent our side from winning this war than anyone else. How do you expect our forces to win the hearts and minds of the people when all they do is take off from one Army base and fly overhead 1500 feet while Charlie is sitting down there and he's got 'em by the testicles jerking, and every time he jerks their hearts and minds follow⁴³?" –Unidentified American Correspondent to US Army General Robert R. Williams

For the Americans, the air mobility concept was a critical factor for the US Army's success during the Battle at LZ X-Ray. The speed and surprise achieved at LZ X-Ray allowed the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry to insert quickly and establish an initial perimeter. Air mobility operations were also critical in resupplying the battalion, inserting reinforcements, and evacuating casualties. Helicopters served as the battalion's lifeline. Without the helicopters, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry would have been decimated after running out of ammunition, food and water, and medical supplies. The helicopters also provided direct fire support at close range with guns and ARA. Despite the contributions of the helicopter at LZ X-Ray, indirect fire support and CAS were the two main assets that kept the battalion from being overrun. On the second

⁴² U.S. Department of Defense 32

⁴³ Krepinevich 171

day of fighting alone, over thirty thousand artillery rounds were fired in support of the battalion within the first several hours of fighting. CAS sorties were conducted almost non-stop during the three day battle. Also, B-52 strikes known as “arch lights” were used on PAVN positions and assembly areas. The battle at LZ X-Ray was the first time the B-52 was used in the tactical mode⁴⁴.

The planning and execution of the battle at LZ X-Ray had many faults. The intelligence collected prior to the battle reported a company-sized element of approximately two hundred PAVN soldiers. After the first wave of helicopters landed, a captured PAVN soldier reported a regimental sized unit in the area⁴⁵. The revelation had the Americans outnumbered at an eight to one ratio.

Another issue of the campaign was the PAVN’s ability to choose the time and place to fight, and always on ground favorable to their scheme of maneuver. Air mobility was mainly used for search and destroy missions; where the enemy was, the air cavalry would conduct offensive operations. The PAVN were also able to use Cambodia (and Laos) as a sanctuary. American incursions into Cambodia were prohibited at the time and allowed the PAVN to rest and refit for the next battle of their choosing⁴⁶.

The air mobility concept was not used for flanking the enemy’s rear position at LZ X-Ray. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) knew enemy forces were in the area but were uninformed of their array and positioning in regards to LZ X-Ray. The air assault on PAVN

⁴⁴ Antonio S. Thompson, ed., and Christos G. Frentzos, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of American Military and Diplomatic History, 1865 to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013). 247

⁴⁵ Vietnam in HD, *The Beginning (1964-1965)*, documentary, 1:00:00, The History Channel, November 9, 2011.

⁴⁶ Timothy J. Lomperis, “Giap’s Dream, Westmoreland’s Nightmare,” *Parameters: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army*, (1988): 18-31, <http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/1988/1988%20lomperis.pdf>

forces at Plei Me prior to LZ X-Ray was highly successful in relieving pressure on the Special Forces' camp and nearly cutting the PAVN unit off from the majority of its forces. At LZ X-Ray, inaccurate intelligence reports from higher headquarters put US forces into an almost unwinnable situation. Air mobility relies heavily on accurate intelligence, since air cavalry elements operate forward and mostly in restricted terrain. Also, without heavy direct fire weapons such as tanks, armored personnel carriers, or mounted recoilless rifles, the air cavalry forces rely heavily on organic indirect fire assets. Indirect fires and CAS do provide excellent cover for air cavalry forces, but heavy direct fire weapons are critical when fighting a conventional battle.

Initially developed to fight a counter insurgency and a low to mid-intensity conflict in Vietnam, General Westmoreland used air mobility to fight a conventional war through search and destroy missions. Following the American victory at Ia Drang, the air mobility concept would be used primarily for General Westmoreland's body count strategy.

During his tenure in Vietnam, General Westmoreland fought several different types of warfare throughout South Vietnam. Westmoreland had to prevent PAVN forces' infiltration into South Vietnam and defeat a growing insurgency. The successful attrition of PAVN conventional forces through a body count strategy fixated General Westmoreland on what he thought was the key to America and South Vietnam's success in the war⁴⁷. Search and destroy missions through use of air mobility operations were the keys to achieving high enemy body counts during offensive operations. The air mobility concept conducted by the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) would be initially seen as how the war was going to be waged. The speed and surprise of the air mobility employed by the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), along with their

⁴⁷ Thompson and Frentzos 247-248

organic indirect fire assets and use of “leap frogging” to maintain territorial gains, was highly successful throughout the war. However, the concept of air mobility used as merely a delivery means into battle for regular light infantry confused how air mobility was originally intended to be implemented. Regular infantry units, lacking organic indirect fire assets, had to conduct limited operations within range of non-organic supporting indirect fire assets and were not accustomed to operating as the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) forces had during Ia Drang. Helicopters became available to any unit who wanted to use them⁴⁸. The body count strategy fixated commanders on achieving a high count to measure success during operations. Air mobility eventually became the way to get to the enemy to fight instead of a way to fight the enemy.

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⁴⁸ General Donn A. Starry, Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 2002, Washington, D.C., 52-56.

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