

CONTROLLING THE POPULATION: A STUDY OF THE CIVILIAN
IRREGULAR DEFENSE GROUP

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Art of War

by

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ABSTRACT

CONTROLLING THE POPULATION: A STUDY OF THE CIVILIAN IRREGULAR DEFENSE GROUP, by MAJ Jesse R. Stewart, 123 pages.

Controlling the population in any counterinsurgency is critical to the success of the counterinsurgent. Three historical theorists, Sir Robert Thompson, David Galula, and Robert Trinquier all agree on this pertinent issue. Success in Malaya hinged on controlling the population in New Villages. Security in Algeria depended on sectors or districts. In both examples, the raising of local security forces to control the population was essential. Two major counterinsurgency efforts were used in Vietnam in controlling the population. The Strategic Hamlet Program, led by the Republic of Vietnam, aimed at controlling the population and winning popular support to the RVN. The second, and the focus of this thesis, was the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). The CIDG program raised local security forces in the highlands of South Vietnam to protect the villages from Viet Cong influence and intimidation. Initially, the program was defensive in nature. As ground forces moved into Vietnam in 1965, the CIDG program lost its defensive focus and became offensively focused through the Mobile Strike Forces (MSF). The MSFs initially were designed to reinforce CIDG camps, but quickly became additional infantry battalions. This transition ultimately led to the degradation of the CIDG program and ultimately its disbandment.

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ACRONYMS

AOR	Area of Responsibility
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
CGSDC	Civil Guards and Self Defense Corps
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
COIN	Counterinsurgency
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
KIA	Killed in Action
LLDB	South Vietnamese Special Forces Command (Luc-Luong-Dac-Biet)
MAAG-V	Military Advisory and Assistance Group-Vietnam
MAC-V	Military Assistance Command-Vietnam
MIKE	Mobile Strike
MGF	Mobile Guerilla Force
MSF	Mobile Strike Force
NASM	National Security Action Memorandum
NCO	Non-commissioned Officers
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OCO	Office of Civil Operations
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
RVN	Republic of Vietnam

SOG	Studies and Observation Group
SOF	Special Operations Force
SSF	Special Service Force
USSF	United States Special Forces
VC	Viet Cong
VSO	Village Stability Operations

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Counterinsurgency wars made up a significant number of the conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries. These conflicts range from the Philippines in the late 19th and early 20th century to current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ As long as an insurgency has a cause, it is relatively simple to start and relatively cheap to maintain for the insurgent. They have the potential to further expand at an alarming rate when a government or foreign occupier (such as the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan) is incapable of providing security and controlling the host nation population.² In most cases, history has shown using an iron fist to contain insurgencies makes it difficult for the counterinsurgent to win.³ The need to control the population through locally raised forces has in one form or another been crucial to the success of the counterinsurgent in many conflicts.

Special Operation Forces (SOF) or some form of SOF played a significant role in every counterinsurgency campaign since the 1940s.⁴ The contributions by US Special

¹Major Combat Operations (MCO) make up only a handful of wars in the 20th and 21st centuries (World War I, World War II, Korea). Counterinsurgencies such as the Philippines in 1898-1902, Ireland in 1919-1921 and the reoccurring insurgency by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1969-2005, the Malayan Insurgency (Emergency) during 1948 to 1960, the Vietnam Insurgencies from 1945-1975, the Rhodesian (Zimbabwe) Insurgency in the 1960-1970s, and the Dhofar (Oman) Insurgency during the 1970s are a few examples.

²Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (Saint Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 21, 55-57.

³For example the French in Algeria and the Soviets in Afghanistan.

⁴See Chapter 4 for more on the beginning and evolution of Special Forces.

Forces (USSF) in Vietnam were significant and ultimately validated the organization. The Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) was the primary counterinsurgency mission for USSF during the Vietnam conflict. This paper argues that the CIDG program was a successful counterinsurgency tool until 1965 when it was used defensively or was terrain-focused. However, once the CIDG program turned into an offensive tool through the Mobile Strike Force (MSF), the program lost its effectiveness at controlling the population throughout the duration of the Vietnam War.

Literature Review

The literature supporting this paper is extensive. Thus, each chapter has its own review. However, below are some of the most significant books used during this study. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian's book *Counterinsurgency Warfare* offers an overview and analysis of most counterinsurgency campaigns since the Philippines in 1898. Robert Thompson's book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* provides a primary source account and analysis during the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam War, in which he served as an advisor to President Diem of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

James Willbanks' book, *Abandoning Vietnam* provides an overarching historical view of the Vietnam War. He also provides comprehensive analysis of each stage of the Vietnam War from the advisory days to the final policy of Vietnamization. Dale Andrade's article titled "Westmoreland was Right" in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* present a provocative account arguing the Vietnam War cannot be viewed only in black or white. He postulates that the war was extremely gray and that taking only one side of the debate limits the practitioner and academic's ability to gain proper analysis of the conflict.

Two books on US Special Forces in Vietnam are worth highlighting. The first is Colonel Francis Kelly's (former 5th Special Forces Group Commander during the Vietnam War) army-sanctioned monograph titled *U.S. Army Special Forces*. This hybrid primary/secondary account provides a historical account of US Special Forces and their role with the CIDG and Mobile Strike Forces during the Vietnam War. Charles Simpson's (also a former commander of 5th Special Forces Group during Vietnam) primary source account, *Inside the Green Berets*, also gives an overarching of the CIDG program, but also looks at the evolution of US Special Forces during the initial years of its inception up through the Vietnam War.

Research Methodology

The case study research methodology is used as the primary research method to explore the historical context of Vietnam. Robert K. Yin defines the case study research method "as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used."⁵ This methodology proves useful especially when comparing and contrasting other historical case studies of counterinsurgency.

The secondary research methodology utilized in this study is the oral history interviews from the United States Army Command and General Staff College Scholars' Program. Over 100 oral interviews were conducted throughout the course of this study ranging with practitioners and academics from Malaya, Vietnam, Dhofar (Oman),

⁵R. K. Yin, *Case study research: Design and methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage. 1984), 23.

Vietnam, El-Salvador, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. These interviews were conducted both in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Summary

Chapter 2 addresses three historical theorists on counterinsurgency. Robert Thompson provides analysis as an administrator in Malaya and later as an advisor to the president of Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Robert Trinquier offers examination of the Algerian insurgency from the French perspective. Finally, David Galula provides insight, again from the Algerian insurgency perspective as a French officer. All three theorists address the importance of population control and raising of local security forces.

Chapter 3 looks at the Vietnam War, and initially focuses on the US advisory period (1954 to 1965) and then transitions to the ground war conducted from 1965 to 1972. This section addresses RVN attempts at population control, such as the Strategic Hamlet Program. It also addresses pacification efforts such as the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program and the final US strategy of Vietnamization.

Chapter 4 looks at the origins and forming of US Special Forces (USSF). This section traces the beginnings of USSF during World War II to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS consisted of two groups; the Jedburghs and the Operational Groups. The Jedburgh groups would establish the template for conducting unconventional warfare (the initial primary mission of USSF). The Operational groups provided the basis for what a Special Forces Team would look like once 10th Special Forces Group and subsequent groups were formed.

Chapter 5 addresses the primary thesis of this paper, the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). The CIDG was initially the design of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The project started as a test bed for controlling the population of the highlands of South Vietnam over which the RVN had little influence or control. These ethnic minority groups were seen as potential safe havens for the Viet Cong and thus could not be ignored. US Special Forces were used to train up and equip indigenous local security forces to protect their villages (defensively focused) and provide basic quality of life needs. With the success of the Buon Enoa project, the program expanded as did the number of Special Forces soldiers flowing into Vietnam. In 1965 many CIDG camps were turned into Mobile Strike Forces (MSF). MSF's initial mission was to provide a quick reaction force to vulnerable CIDG camps, but quickly turned to doing offensive missions at the direction of Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MAC-V). With this turn in mission, the capability to control the population became difficult and eventually ineffective.

CHAPTER 2

COUNTERINSURGENCY THEORISTS

The only person who really understands communism is the communist who understands it too late—just, in fact, as he is about to be disemboweled, garroted or, more mercifully, shot by his former comrades.

– Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*

Introduction

Discussing the modern-day history of warfare, it is almost impossible not to include the words “insurgency” or “counterinsurgency.” These terms have become everyday language in 21st century conflict, yet the United States has been frustrated in response to the evolution of the Global War on Terrorism when it realized they were involved in two of the most complicated insurgency campaigns in modern history despite the seemingly successful initial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. While doctrine may have been thin in the early stages of the Global War on Terrorism, historical records were not. Several books, articles, essays, lessons learned and interviews were extensively available on numerous counterinsurgency campaigns executed in the 20th century; many of those conflicts were waged successfully by allies of the United States. This chapter provides definitions for insurgency and counterinsurgency based on historical theorists of the Vietnam Era. It also addresses important implications for population control and the raising of irregular forces.

Defining Insurgency

To properly understand counterinsurgency, it is important to understand and define the catalyst; insurgency. While many insurgents have published their

“manifestos,” such as Mao Tse-Tung and Che Guevara to support their narratives and theories, Tim Jones provides a holistic and contiguous definition that reflects most theorists, both insurgent and counterinsurgent, in his literary work on the British Special Air Service:

an insurgency is defined as: a campaign of protracted political subversion, terrorism and guerrilla war that embroils a substantial portion of a nation-state’s population and seeks revolutionary change in the existing ideological, political or social system. There is no sure formula to determine the best (COIN) approach to take, as each conflict has unique features.⁶

What this definition alludes to is while a counterinsurgent has a multitude of approaches of countering insurgent actions (most which must be correct in action) but must do everything right in the eyes of the people, the insurgent only has to do minimal things right and has only the need of a much narrower campaign plan to execute its mission. To compare this to the Army definition of insurgency as stated in its cornerstone doctrine on counterinsurgency,

An *insurgency* is an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (JP 1-02). Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.⁷

Further breaking down this definition into the three categories of an insurgency, one can easily see how options to an insurgent are easier than that of the counterinsurgent. “Political subversion can be defined as any non-military activity designed to destabilize it, including the key tools of psychological operations and

⁶Tim Jones, *Postwar Counterinsurgency and the SAS 1945-195* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 1.

⁷Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 1-1.

propaganda.”⁸ Propaganda can run the spectrum of possible methods but can be narrowed to “information, ideas, doctrines, or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion . . . of a group or a sponsor.” Propaganda is an extremely useful tool for the insurgents, mainly because it does not necessarily need to be true. If a government were to make similar claims, it would be very easy for the insurgent to undermine the integrity of that institution, thereby furthering the cause of the insurgent.⁹

Similar to propaganda, terrorism is a psychological instrument. The ability to display to the population that the government is incapable of securing the population becomes an excellent public affairs message for the insurgent. A bomb placed at the corner of a busy street discredits the police. A shooting next to a military checkpoint where the shooter melts into the crowd discredits the military. Both examples potentially show the ineptitude of the government to provide policy guidelines appropriate in dealing with an “uprising,” or “political terrorism.” The final category is guerrilla warfare. While some confuse terrorism with guerilla warfare, Jones makes an argument that the terrorist aims at non-discriminate violence, while the guerilla war is fought amongst, small semi-independent mobile forces aimed at ambushing military targets and sabotaging their infrastructure. Often times the transition from terrorism to guerilla warfare is tied to the organization of the insurgent. His ability to conduct coordinating attacks is difficult without the infrastructure to support it.¹⁰

⁸Jones, *Postwar Counterinsurgency and the SAS 1945-1952*, 1-2.

⁹*Ibid.*, 1-3.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

Mao Tse-Tung

Mao Tse-Tung contends that the aims of guerrilla warfare and political movement are intertwined to ensure that the political goal is achieved. He outlines in his book

Guerilla Warfare seven steps in attaining guerrilla and political policy:

1. Arousing and organizing the people.
2. Achieving internal unification politically
3. Establishing bases.
4. Equipping forces.
5. Recovering national strength.
6. Destroying enemy's national strength
7. Regaining lost territories.¹¹

Based on Mao's campaign plan, which clearly took into account all aspects of his national power available to him (or least projected national power), it is understandable to see why future insurgents would take his model and export it into a similar campaign.

One of the key aspects of his plan was keeping the population as the center of gravity throughout the guerilla campaign. He states, "What is the relationship of guerilla warfare to the people? Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail, as it must if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people and their sympathy, cooperation, and assistance cannot be gained. The essence of guerrilla warfare is thus revolutionary in character."¹²

¹¹Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 43.

¹²*Ibid.*, 43-44.

If it is therefore easy for a counterinsurgent to lose the population by one act, how does one go about defending or defeating this mindset? It is especially difficult when the counterinsurgent or the outside source assisting the host nation is slow to realize they are involved in an insurgency.

Counterinsurgency Theorists

Sir Robert Thompson

Sir Robert Thompson, a British counterinsurgency theorist, drew upon his experiences in Malaya and Vietnam in an attempt to provide a theoretical framework for conducting counterinsurgency operations. He was one of the famous “Hearts and Minds” theorists that provoke a negative reaction from most Vietnam-era and modern day practitioners. However, it is important to note that the term “Hearts and Minds” used in Malaya, is not necessarily the “Hearts and Minds” of Iraq or Afghanistan. While soldiers (and commanders) see “Hearts in Minds” as synonymous to the “Velvet Hand” approach used by the Marines in Fallujah in 2004, the British had a much different meaning. Tim Jones exemplifies the British “Hearts and Minds” concept when he discusses Thompson’s methods in Malaya:

1. The government must inform the people that it aims to maintain a free, independent and politically and economically viable nation-state.
2. COIN action must (be seen to) be legal and civilized.
3. It must be planned and implemented by a director of operations and his administration.
4. The focus should be on counter-subversion, especially reforms and propaganda, and uprooting insurgent underground organization.

5. There must be military/security operations from strategic bases, while the people are protected from intimidation—if needs be, by relocation to secure areas.¹³

Thompson offers five basic principles for a government countering an insurgency. The first is the government must have clear political aim: to establish a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable. The government must be able to extend population control through the use of army, police or irregular forces. The insurgency must demand priority, but must not be treated in isolation.¹⁴

The second principle states that the government must function in accordance with the law. Governments must be careful not to abuse powers they obtain, particularly in regards to detention. Violating laws in order to circumvent the process can lead to shifting the population towards the insurgent. To ensure the rule of law is in accordance, it is critical that detainees receive a quick and fair trial. This is not to say draconian measures were never used by the government, in fact they did through massive relocation of populations into New Villages and programs such as food denial. While these instances may seem ludicrous in current conflicts, they were still within the rule of law at the time the Malayan Emergency was fought.¹⁵

¹³Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 62-70.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 52-54.

The third and fourth principles go hand in hand. The third principle states the government must have an overall plan. The fourth states that the government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerillas. The plan must be all encompassing. It should cover all military, political, social, economic, administrative, police and any other measures affecting the insurgency.¹⁶

The fifth principle states that in the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base areas first. After securing its base, it can begin expanding influence and protection outside. This is similar to the oil spot theory in that the counterinsurgent secures one area and then expands the security to neighboring areas. The British executed this through the “New Village” concept and Thompson advocated during Vietnam in the Strategic Hamlet Program.¹⁷ Both used irregular forces to achieve the aim of controlling populations from a distance.¹⁸

David Galula

One of the most famous counterinsurgent theorists and one cited extensively in of the US Army Field Manual 3-24 is David Galula. Galula was an officer during the French campaign in Algeria from August of 1956 to April 1958, and much of his historical context in his writing comes from that era. However, his approach is holistic, acknowledging in his writings that the insurgency falls in two primary areas: The “cold revolutionary war” when the insurgent’s activity remains on the whole legal and non-

¹⁶Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 55.

¹⁷See Vietnam chapter for a discussion of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

¹⁸Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 57-58.

violent and the “hot revolutionary war,” when the insurgent’s activity becomes openly illegal and violent.¹⁹

The key point for the counterinsurgent becomes identifying the breaking point between the two, and then stepping in to combat the hot revolutionary war. Galula identifies four general courses of action for counterinsurgents to take when intervention becomes necessary:

1. He may act directly on the insurgent leaders.
2. He may act indirectly on the conditions that are propitious to an insurgency.
3. He may infiltrate the insurgent movement and try to make it ineffective.
4. He may build up or reinforce his political machine.²⁰

In course of action one, the counterinsurgent may act in direct manner in dealing with the insurgent leaders in order to deprive him of building up the movement before it grabs hold. By reducing key leaders of an insurgency before he has the opportunity to establish a base within the population, the counterinsurgent may nip the insurgency in the bud. This is obviously easier in totalitarian countries, but through rule of law, the democracy can use the courts or ban the organizations effectively making them illegal. The direct approach works well if three conditions are met: The insurgents cause has little appeal, the counterinsurgent has the legal power to act, and the counterinsurgent can prevent the insurgent from gaining publicity.²¹

¹⁹David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964), 63.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 64.

²¹*Ibid.*, 65-66.

The second course of action attempts to take an indirect approach to counter the insurgent. In this method, the counterinsurgent can attempt to cut off outside support such as financial and logistical support in the event the insurgency has outside influence or geographical influence the counterinsurgent does not have control over. The most basic thing a counterinsurgent can do is deprive the insurgent of his narrative within the population, for example providing basic solutions to the grievances of the people.²²

The third course of action involves infiltrating the insurgent organization in an attempt to bring the organization down from the inside. This is obviously the most difficult of the four courses of action and most dangerous for the individuals conducting the infiltration. Even if the infiltrator cannot bring the insurgency to a halt, he can at least report on its activities to the legitimate government.²³

The final course of action involves the government building up its own political machine and influence. If the government is seen as effective at countering the insurgency, he may be capable of isolating the insurgent from the population. Methods used during this course of action may include programs such as the New Village program in Malaya or the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam. Regardless of the method used, it is imperative that a local security force, ideally made up of local citizens, be built up to control the population centers.²⁴

One key lesson learned over the course of the insurgency in Vietnam is to be very cautious on his fourth point, as supporting a corrupt or “unsupportable” government

²²Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 66-67.

²³*Ibid.*, 67-68.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 68-69.

could lead to further alienating the population the counterinsurgent is trying to protect. Galula's underlying point remains consistent with all of the historical theorists studied; control of the population is essential in winning a counterinsurgency fight.

Roger Trinquier

Robert Trinquier, like Galula was a French Army officer that served in Algeria multiple times during the conflict. Trinquier was one of the first theorists to add to the World War II frame of reference that the elements war consisted of the mission, the terrain, the resources and the enemy. Trinquier adds an additional element of war; the population. He acknowledges and presses for that the battlefield is no longer restricted and that it can consist of an entire nation, reiterating the emphasis on the population.²⁵

Trinquier advocates the using of local police with army support (intelligence collection capabilities) to ultimately rid sectors and districts of insurgents. He acknowledges that in no way is the army going to have the intelligence collecting capabilities than that local police offer. Therefore the police play a significant role in controlling the population. Trinquier acknowledges there will difficulties in using the police for army-type activities such as cordon and searches or raids.²⁶

Trinquier acknowledges these challenges in order to find ways to overcome them. The first challenge acknowledges that modern warfare is a new experience, and systematic raids by local police will cause inherent difficulties with the population they know and are familiar with. Trinquier also acknowledges that the prisons currently used

²⁵Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI, 1985), 29.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 43-44.

will not handle the amount of detainees. These conditions the detainees live under could potentially add to the narrative of the insurgent.²⁷

The second challenge lies in that if war is not declared, the insurgent will have an easier time melting back into the population, because the roles of the police are restricted. The third and final challenge is that the war will be waged among the civilian populace. Harsh actions by the police could be viewed as brutality by the local populace and potentially sway them away from the government leaving them vulnerable to the insurgent. Day and night police will be looking for insurgents, a method that may serve to intimidate the population the counterinsurgent wishes to protect.²⁸

Controlling the Population

All theorists emphasized the importance of using local security forces in controlling the population. They understood losing the will of the population would ultimately result in the insurgent gaining the upper hand. Thompson mentions the use of local security forces in securing “New Villages” in an effort to keep communist insurgents from entering or gaining influence in Malaya. Thompson also advocated strongly for the use of local security forces, rather than the Vietnamese Army to secure the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam.²⁹ Trinquier uses the terms “districts” and “sector forces” to protect the various sector villages established in Algiers.³⁰ Finally,

²⁷Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, 45-46.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 46-48.

²⁹Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 141-142.

³⁰Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, 30.

Galula simply referred to local security forces as “static forces.”³¹ All forces, despite nomenclature had the same mission, control of the population. Without this control, host nations would not be able to hold areas already cleared, as they began the build phase.

Conclusion

Key to understanding insurgencies and counterinsurgencies is there is no one single book, theorist, or military field manual that can accurately articulate how to wage counterinsurgency conflicts. Each is unique in nature and what may have worked in Malaya or Vietnam is not necessarily going to work in Dhofar or Northern Ireland. By taking the principles of each theorist and combining them into a comprehensive view, the practitioner can apply best practices to make a decision on how to approach the campaign. Relying strictly on doctrine limits the practitioner’s ability to develop a comprehensive campaign plan.

The key point of all three theorists (to include the insurgent Mao) is the ultimate control of the population. Without it, a counterinsurgent will be at a disadvantage and will likely lose the campaign. Case studies such as Malaya and Algiers prove this point. Later in this thesis, population control through the Civilian Irregular Defense Group will be developed in more detail.

³¹Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 77-78.

CHAPTER 3

THE VIETNAM CAMPAIGN; 1950-1972

“You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,” said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark for a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but is also irrelevant.”

— Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy*

Introduction

The Vietnam War is often viewed as one of the biggest strategic failures of the United States in its history.³² From the strategic perspective, this may be true; however, at the operational and tactical levels the war becomes much grayer. Programs such as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) are two such examples that show success at the operational and tactical levels. While the Vietnam War is remembered by most as being a complete failure, there are still important lessons that need to be learned that can add to the academic and practitioner’s study for current and future conflicts.

If the Vietnam War is looked at only in terms of disappointment in the hands of the US military as an institution in the 1970s, important lessons are not identified in developing the military institution that must prepare to fight any conflict that arises. There were successful tactical and operational programs that are often overshadowed by the strategic failure of Vietnam.³³ Understanding these complexities is essential in any

³²For more on the strategic-level of failure in Vietnam, see H. R. McMaster’s, *Dereliction of Duty*.

³³Such as CORDS and the CIDG programs.

academic or practitioner debate regarding the war in Vietnam, as well as future conflicts. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overarching view of the Vietnam War in order to better understand the complexity of the conflict before focusing on the contributions of the United States Army Special Forces and the Civilian Irregular Defense Group attempts at population control.

Literature Review

The sources for studying the Vietnam War are extremely vast, given the number of theorists, military practitioners, and politicians that were influenced by the conflict, directly or indirectly. However, this essay will discuss some of the sources that proved valuable for the research. Dale Andrade's article in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, "Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," provides a strong argument for the Vietnam War being "gray" and that no perfect solution was evident, regardless of the strategy taken by the commanders on the ground. This evaluation of the Vietnam War provides an uncomfortable assessment to those practitioners and theorists hoping to find a "one answer" solution and the hope to glean lessons learned that are applicable in future conflicts. However, it does show the degree of complexities that exist in counterinsurgency warfare. Andrade realizes and articulates that the strategy in Vietnam had to look at both aspects; conventional large scale conflict and low-intensity conflict or counterinsurgency. Ignoring one or the other will ultimately lead to failure.

The potential antithesis to Andrade can be found in Andrew Krepinevich's book *The Army and Vietnam*. *The Army and Vietnam* provides a different side to the debate, highlighting the Army's incapacity to recognize the insurgency and its inability to change

as in institution as the main problem set. This book provides a black and white assessment that fails to ignore the complexity of both conflicts; high-intensity versus low-intensity conflict, ultimately that Andrade addresses in his article referenced above. This is not to say Krepinevich's work is not useful, but it is important to highlight his black or white analysis to studying the Vietnam War.

James Willbanks' book *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* provides an excellent account of the various sides in the Vietnam debate, particularly in terms of the post 1968 Tet Offensive and in regard to the policy of Vietnamization. Willbanks work offers perhaps the most comprehensive and balanced study of the books studied in the research of this thesis.

W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson Frizzell's *Army in Vietnam* provides firsthand accounts from such leaders as Major General Edward Lansdale and General Westmoreland. These articles written by operational-level practitioners provide firsthand accounts of the complexity in dealing with the conflict and the strategic players in Washington. Jeffery Race's *War Comes to Long An* provides a primary source account of the war in Vietnam from the province-level, and explains how the Viet Cong developed and implemented a strategy that the Republic of Vietnam was incapable of matching. His text is key to studying the conflict in that it provides insight by both a practitioner and later, analyst. This provocative text provides excellent insight into the grayer version of Vietnam that is often lost between the two camps of practitioners and analysts. Race's book addresses this in detail.³⁴

³⁴Other valuable resources for studying the Vietnam Conflict for context purposes are Richard Hunt's *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and*

Origins of the Conflict: The Advisory Years 1950-1965

1950-1954: French Occupation

The primary role of the US in Indochina from 1950-1954 was in providing financial and military equipment support to the French in Indo-China. The justification for this support fell in line with the Domino Theory and avoided overextending the military already committed in Korea.³⁵ The uneasiness with France's ability to contain the conflict in Vietnam, particularly with minimal US financial and military equipment support, can be seen in the *Pentagon Papers*:

Although the French in Indochina have made far-reaching concessions to the Vietnamese desire for autonomy, French actions on the scene have been directed toward whittling down the powers and the territorial extent of the Vietnam "Free State." This process the Vietnamese have continued to resist. Given the present elements in the situation guerrilla warfare may continue indefinitely.³⁶

Each year, financial assistance, along with US military advisors increased. In 1950, the United States Military Advisory and Assistance Group-V (MAAG-V) consisted of only four individuals, swelling to 342 by 1954. Senior US officers were certain the French would have Vietnam contained by 1955. During a visit to the MAAG-V in 1953, Lieutenant General John O'Daniel stated the French would defeat the Viet Minh by

Minds; Eric Bergerud's *The Dynamics of Defeat*; Robert Komer's, *Bureaucracy at War*; *The Pentagon Papers*.

³⁵The Domino Theory states that if one country fell to communism, then others around it would fall as well. This lens of international relations ultimately led to the Kennedy administration and later Johnson's administration in justifying action in South Vietnam.

³⁶*Pentagon Papers*, 3:29.

1955.³⁷ After the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French surrendered to the Viet Minh on 7 May 1954, with peace negotiations beginning in Geneva the next day.³⁸

US Intervention (1954-1965)

United States' direct involvement in Vietnam began in 1954 following the French defeat resulting in the creation of North and South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel by the United Nations. The new President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), Ngo Dinh Diem, succeeded the Emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai, after the separation of North and South Vietnam. Diem received immediate support from President Eisenhower. Diem was seen as the only legitimate ally in the region subsequent to the successful communist takeover of China.³⁹

President Eisenhower immediately sent Edward Lansdale⁴⁰ and a small team of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers to assist President Diem in his role as the leader of RVN. Lansdale and other senior leaders provided Diem with advisory efforts, primarily focusing on how to raise the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).⁴¹

³⁷*Pentagon Papers*, 2:56.

³⁸For more information on the French Indochina Wars, see Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: Insurgency in Indochina, 1946-63* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963).

³⁹John Nagl, *Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 120-121.

⁴⁰Edward Lansdale was a former US Air Force officer who served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and then later the Central Intelligence Agency. He eventually attained the rank of Major General. He served in Vietnam as an advisor to the French army in 1953 and then served as the head of the Saigon Military Mission from 1954-1957.

⁴¹Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009), 136.

Lansdale would later argue that the US's inability to grasp the cultural gap between the ARVN and US generals would ultimately lead to failure in the execution of the Vietnam War.⁴²

One insurgent account recalled, "By relying on force, the South Vietnamese were temporarily able to stabilize the situation and increase the reputation of the counter-revolutionaries."⁴³ To further illustrate this point, in 1959 a presidential inquiry to investigate the MAAG-V assessed that fighting insurgents by the South Vietnamese was held at a lesser level than fighting a conventional war:

Tailoring a military force to the task of countering external aggression--i.e. countering another military force entails some sacrifice of capabilities to counter internal aggression. The latter requires widespread deployment, rather than concentration. It requires small, mobile, lightly equipped units of the ranger for commando type. It requires different weapons, command systems, communications, logistics.⁴⁴

With the focus primarily on the conventional South Vietnamese army, the Territorial Forces of Civil Guards and Self Defense Corps were created and held responsibility for protecting villages and controlling the population while the ARVN prepared for a potential large-scale invasion from the north.⁴⁵ The Territorial Forces suffered in terms of a lack of leadership, manpower and overall logistical support. The Diem government did not see it as the army's responsibility to provide local protection to

⁴²Edward Lansdale, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, ed. W. Scott Thompson and Donald Frizzell (New York: Crane Russak and Company, 1977), 40-47.

⁴³Mark Moyar, *Triumph Unforsaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80.

⁴⁴*Pentagon Papers*, 2:435.

⁴⁵These forces would later be renamed Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PFs).

the population, but rather the responsibility of the Civil Guards and Self Defense Corps (CGSDC), largely due to the CGSDC local knowledge of the area and intelligence collection capabilities. However, Diem did see it as vital for them to fall under the operational control of the ARVN for command and control purposes.⁴⁶

In 1960, the Viet Cong⁴⁷ began raiding villages to kill government supporters and officials. When the Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps failed to prevent mass killings, Diem sent the army in to replace the village militia forces to control the population. This initial defeat was largely due to the leadership and equipment problems within the Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps. ARVN was not prepared for these types of counterinsurgency operations. They often made the situation worse by taking extremely harsh measures towards the population they were supposed to be protecting. The army had difficulty protecting the local population within their villages and conducting small unit patrols outside the villages to find the guerillas responsible for the harassing attacks.⁴⁸

Strategic Hamlet Program

The Strategic Hamlet Program was one of President Diem's major attempts at countering the rural insurgency and providing a strategic form of controlling the

⁴⁶Moyar, *Triumph Unforsaken*, 67-72. Also see Territorial Forces Monographs written by former Cambodian, Laotian and South Vietnamese officers, published by the US Army Center of Military History. These monographs provide excellent firsthand knowledge of the Territorial Forces throughout the Indochina Wars.

⁴⁷Short for Vietnamese Communist. The Viet Cong were the Viet Minh cadre left in the South following the defeat of the French and the official annexation of North and South Vietnam.

⁴⁸Moyar, *Question of Command*, 137-140.

population against the Viet Cong. The program was modeled on the British “New Village” program in Malaya, which successfully separated the Communists Terrorists (CTs) from the Malayan and Chinese populations during the Malayan Emergency.⁴⁹ The fundamental aim was to isolate and control the population both physically and politically from the Viet Cong insurgency. Sir Robert Thompson explained the importance of the Strategic Hamlet Program to Diem:

It is most important that province chiefs and the responsible military commanders should fully understand the concept which lies behind successful anti-communist guerilla operations, i.e. the physical and political separation of the guerillas from the population. One must get all the ‘little fishes’ out of the ‘water’ and keep them out then they die. All the required measures stem from this main aim, and in carrying out such measures, all officers must bear constantly in mind how far the measures and the manner in which they are carried out are achieving the *right results* (author italics added). It is necessary not only to maintain the momentum (of the strategic hamlet program) but also the aim.⁵⁰

According to Thompson, the Strategic Hamlet Program needed to have three main objectives. The first was the protection of the population, which was imperative for the other two objectives. The second aim was to unite the people and involve them in positive action on the side of the government. The third aim of the program was the development of political, economic and social fields. This aim would facilitate a better quality of life for the South Vietnamese population and turn, hopefully win them over to the side of the government and keep them from supporting the Viet Cong. At stage three, the community begins to see the benefits of supporting the program through better schools, healthcare, markets and advances in agriculture. President Diem and his brother

⁴⁹For more on the Malayan Emergency, see Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.

⁵⁰Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 123-124.

Ngo Kinh Nhu, who was responsible for carrying out the Strategic Hamlet Program, saw that would lead to a buildup in their political support and increase their power base amongst those individuals vulnerable to Communist influence.⁵¹

Unfortunately the potential of the program was never realized due to several reasons. The first was the lack of support from the United States MAC-V Command, in particular its commander, General Paul Harkins. General Harkins was indifferent when it came to winning the over the population of the rural areas, rather focusing on large-scale conventional tactics of ARVN instead of development of the Strategic Hamlet population.⁵² In one interview regarding the political implications of the use of napalm on villages he stated, “It really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong. And that is what counts.”⁵³

The second problem with the Strategic Hamlet Program and the most detrimental was the Vietnamese leadership of the program by Ngo Kinh Nhu. Robert Thompson highlights strategic failures through four key mistakes. The first mistake was trying to use Republican Youth (an organization completely loyal to Diem and Nhu) to run the villages. This resulted in attempting to win popular support from a top-down system rather than a bottom up approach. By using the Republican Youth, this created inherent hostilities amongst village elders that felt they had a traditional leadership role.⁵⁴

⁵¹Ibid., 124-127.

⁵²Nagl, *Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 135.

⁵³Roger Hillsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 442.

⁵⁴Moyar, *Question of Command*, 140-141.

The third mistake was Diem failed to comprehend the Viet Cong influence already in the hamlets. He was not prepared to take the necessary measure to eliminate their influence. The fourth mistake was the relocation of South Vietnamese civilians that had become reliant on certain crops, such as rice, without any consideration of traditional and capable tasks that peasants were comfortable with doing after several generations of agriculture culture.⁵⁵

Another mistake and crippling factor to the program was the speed in which the Diem government attempted to expand the program.⁵⁶ The speed of expanding the program without the right local security forces to manage the Hamlets led to widespread Viet Cong infiltration by presenting them with soft and vulnerable targets leading to widespread fear for hamlet residents.⁵⁷ The British strategy in Malaya was primarily concerned with ensuring each village was complete and ready to integrate with other villages to provide interlocking protection to allow reaction to neighboring attacks. From the security view, it is essential to the success of the program for villages not only to provide internal protection to the hamlet, but also a reaction force to neighboring villages and assist in the general security of the area.⁵⁸

The final reason for failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the unwillingness of the local populace to leave their land. The Vietnamese were often tied to their land for generations and unwilling to relocate. This also coincided with Operation

⁵⁵Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 126-132.

⁵⁶Moyar, *Question of Command*, 144.

⁵⁷Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 138.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 132.

Switchback,⁵⁹ which was the official transfer of the US Special Forces' Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program⁶⁰ from the CIA to MAC-V. These programs are similar in that their goals were to control the population. The Strategic Hamlet Program focused on securing "lowland" South Vietnamese while the CIDG program focused on securing the Montagnards in the highlands of Vietnam, where the RVN had little if any control.⁶¹

President Diem's Assassination and the Successors

The beginning of large-scale US intervention is traced to the series of US-sponsored coups beginning with the initial leader supported by the United States since 1954, President Diem.⁶² Due to his inability to control the growing insurgency, failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program, growing potential of invasion from the North, growing Buddhists protests that had been infiltrated by the North Vietnamese, and the United States belief that the Diem government could no longer control South Vietnam, a coup was staged on 1 November 1963. The coup had passive US support due to Diem's reported lack of leadership from senior US official's assessments and the consensus of senior advisors believed the generals of South Vietnam would be able to provide political leadership in the interim.⁶³

⁵⁹Operation Switchback will be addressed in more detail in chapter 5.

⁶⁰The CIDG will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

⁶¹John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 127-129.

⁶²Moyar, *Question of Command*, 145.

⁶³*Ibid.*

Initially the generals of South Vietnam did not support the coup, but with the understanding that they would not survive without US support, they eventually supported it, leading to the death of Diem and his brother. The end result was the takeover of the RVN by the committee of generals led by General Duong Van Minh.⁶⁴ After almost a decade of dissatisfaction from the various sects of the government, military and population led to further coups from 1963 to 1965, further allowing the insurgency efforts of the Viet Cong to gain momentum and facilitate the invasion of North Vietnamese forces beginning in the first months of 1965.⁶⁵

American Large-Scale Intervention: 1965 to 1972

The Beginning of the Offensive

Shortly following President Diem's assassination, General Harkins was replaced by General William Westmoreland as the MACV Commander and subsequently took command of the US Forces as soldiers began to flow into South Vietnam in 1965. General Westmoreland was a West Point graduate with considerable airborne unit experience. He believed in employing commanders that shared his philosophy that the insurgency in South Vietnam could be defeated through a conventional mindset of overwhelming force through search and destroy operations. This operational concept emphasized the goal of defeating the Viet Cong through a war of attrition based on body-counts of communists and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers.⁶⁶ It could be argued

⁶⁴Moyar, *Triumph Unforsaken*, 226-241.

⁶⁵Moyar, *Question of Command*, 145-150.

⁶⁶Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland* (New York: Willam Morrow and Company, 1994), 118-119.

however that Westmoreland did not have a choice in strategy (between counterinsurgency and large-scale conventional forces) as Saigon was about to fall in 1965.

General Westmoreland favored enemy killed in action (KIA) numbers as the primary measure of effectiveness as opposed to building capacity in the ARVN and RVN to counter an insurgency and run effectively following the end of US involvement in Vietnam. Rather than an “either or” strategy, in hindsight, it should have been an “and” strategy aimed at defeating both insurgency and preparing for an attack from the north. He and other senior military leaders viewed body counts as the only option given the geographically limited war they were forced to fight in South Vietnam. The Battle of the Ia Drang Valley on 14 November of 1965 by elements of the 1st Cavalry Division validated General Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition with US Forces claiming a body count of over 1,200 enemy KIA while only 200 US soldiers were killed.⁶⁷ This battle and subsequent operations led to confusing sense of victory with body count numbers as a whole. As Dale Andrade states:

The strategy used by the US commander, General William C. Westmoreland, was to blame: In focusing on the attrition of enemy forces rather than on defeating the enemy through denial of his access to the population, MACV (Military Assistance Command - Vietnam), missed whatever opportunity it had to deal the insurgents a crippling blow at a low enough cost to permit a continued US military presence in Vietnam in the event of external, overt aggression.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Andrew Krepvinivich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 165-170.

⁶⁸Dale Andrade, “Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 147.

This search and destroy policy caused US military leaders to react to the enemy on the ground, rather than protect the population.⁶⁹ Critics in support of Westmoreland would argue that it was not the job of Americans to secure the population, rather the job of the ARVN. The mission statement given by Westmoreland would only go on to further confuse the overall mission in Vietnam:

To assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment.⁷⁰

The inherent confusion in the two tasks declared by General Westmoreland, the first to “assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat” (a security task), and the second to “attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment” (a political task), would confuse the MAC-V mission and purpose and plague the overall mission for most of the war.⁷¹

During Westmoreland’s first year of command, ARVN continued to decline, as the Viet Cong improved in effectiveness and frequency of attacks. This decline can be attributed to the early success of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army steadily gaining ground.⁷² His solution to the problem was to use US Forces to fill the gap. Several senior officers, such as General Maxwell Taylor, spoke out against

⁶⁹Ibid., 149.

⁷⁰William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 57.

⁷¹Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy* (New York: Random House, 1995), 100-101.

⁷²Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 125.

Westmoreland's policy of search and destroy, but little was done to change it.⁷³

Westmoreland justifies his offensive stance:

Even troops assigned security missions participated in offensive operations. Only minimum numbers remained in static defense, while the bulk of the units pushed into the countryside, patrolling to find the enemy, attacking him, and preventing him from massing to hit the installations. Without vast expenditure of manpower, providing leak proof defensive lines around installations or cities in the manner of Confederate trenches before Richmond was possible.⁷⁴

Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support

While the initial stages of the Vietnam War seemed heading towards a dismal outcome, one of the successes of Vietnam came in the form of the CORDS program. Formed in May of 1967, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) coordinated military and civil pacification under the command of MACV. While the program itself was under Westmoreland's command, CORDS was directly led by Ambassador Robert Komer, a former White House insider who understood the inner workings of the political front of Washington D.C. He also appreciated the complexities of attempting to bring unity of effort to all of the civilian programs in Vietnam such as the State Department, USAID, CIA, White House personnel and military personnel involved in pacification efforts.

⁷³Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 151-153. General Taylor objected to an offensive mindset during the war, preferring the "enclave concept" of protecting population centers. He did not see the "white-faced" soldier capable of operating effectively in an offensive or counter-guerrilla role in the Asian jungles of South Vietnam.

⁷⁴Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 164.

CORDS rapidly began with Operation Takeoff, which was Komer's attempt to avoid the same fate as the Office of Civil Operations (OCO),⁷⁵ the predecessor to CORDS. Komer would move forward with the same dramatic fashion that had given him the nickname "Blowtorch Bob." Project Takeoff had eight key areas Komer wanted to focus initial efforts, all under the direct supervision of his Chief of Staff, L. Wad Lathram:

1. Improve 1968 pacification planning.
2. Accelerate Chieu Hoi.
3. Mount attack on VC infrastructure.
4. Expand and improve ARVN support to pacification.
5. Expand and supplement the Revolutionary Development team effort.
6. Increase capability to handle refugees.
7. Revamp police forces.
8. Press land reform.⁷⁶

The purpose of the program was to bring all of the civilian pacification programs under one central command, except for CIA activities. Komer served as a deputy commander under Westmoreland, in charge of all pacification and civil efforts. Each corps had a civilian deputy that performed the same task with their respective corps as Komer did with the commander of MAC-V. Teams from CORDS traversed all the way

⁷⁵The Office of Civil Operations (OCO) served as the predecessor to CORDS, but only had a 90-day period to prove its usefulness, and ultimately failed. For more on the creation, implementation, and failure of the OCO, see Richard Hunt's book, *Pacification*, 82-98.

⁷⁶Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 100.

down to the district level, having representation in all 250 districts and forty-four provinces.⁷⁷

CORDS was not bound by institutional structure and had the opportunity to write guidelines as it went along. As CORDS evolved over the course of its four year lifespan, it aimed at improving the following eight areas, according to Komer:

1. A series of new measurement systems designed primarily for management purposes.
2. The “Chieu Hoi” defector program.
3. 59-man RD teams and associated village self-development programs.
4. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) National Training Center at Vaung Tau.
5. A new Vietnam Training Center in Washington to train CORDS advisors.
6. The GVN Phung Hoang program, an ambitious effort to destroy Viet Cong infrastructure by any means necessary, known as “Phoenix” to Americans.
7. The CORDS Evaluation Branch to provide accurate reports of conditions in the field to top management.
8. The People’s Self-Defense forces, created after the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁷⁸

The program did not stop at improving itself or the RVN. William Colby,⁷⁹ the director of the Phoenix program and head of CORDS, states in his own words how they improved the RVN:

⁷⁷Nagl, *Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 164-165.

⁷⁸Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does its Thing* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972), 117.

President Thieu quickly understood that a major strategy of pacification required the kinds of unified management structure the Americans had finally produced in the CORDS machinery. In response, he set up a Central Pacification and Development council to direct the campaign and the work of all the Ministries and agencies of the government involved in it. . . . All of the government ministries, including Defense plus the Joint General Staff, were represented in the council, so that its directives were specific and binding on all the local organs involved in the pacification campaign.⁸⁰

Despite the apparent successes of CORDS, in the words of its founder, Robert Komer, “The greatest problem with pacification was that it wasn’t tried seriously until too late, or if not too late certainly very late in the day.”⁸¹ In this statement, Komer was clearly stating that with the invasion of NVA forces in 1965, the war had changed from an “either or” to an “and,” needing to account for both fronts of the war; insurgency within Vietnam and the threat of invasion from the north. Had the CORDS program started earlier in the war, as Ambassador Komer wished, there may have been the potential for a different outcome in the strategic context of the conflict.

Tet Offensive of 1968

The Tet Offensive is often seen as the turning point of the Vietnam War for the United States. Despite the offensive being a huge loss for the Viet Cong (VC), losing some 40,000 to only 1,100 US soldiers and 2,300 ARVN soldiers, the American public viewed it as a defeat and it subsequently served as the change in the course of the war for the United States. General Westmoreland, looking at Tet purely from a military

⁷⁹After the Vietnam War, William Colby became the Director of Central Intelligence. He was also a member of the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, and the Chief of Station in Saigon both before and during the Vietnam War.

⁸⁰William Colby, *Lost Victory* (New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), 260.

⁸¹Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 166.

standpoint saw the battle as an absolute victory which validated his operational concept.

However, the American public and politicians had lost faith in the MAC-V's and

Washington's strategy.⁸² Henry Kissinger (soon to be President Nixon's National

Security Advisor) wrote of the Tet Offensive in January of 1969 in *Foreign Affairs*:

We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process, we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it doesn't win. The North Vietnamese used their main forces the way a bullfighter uses his cape—to keep us lunging into areas of marginal political importance.⁸³

The Tet Offensive began 30-31 January 1968 after the Army had shifted units to the border of Laos and South Vietnam. Intelligence indicated North Vietnamese Army movements and the possibility of major attacks in South Vietnam. Despite the shift, United States and ARVN units were not completely out of position for the surprise attack. However, over 100,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were able to penetrate several South Vietnamese cities to include Saigon and Hue, with Hue taking over four weeks to reclaim from the communists. Despite initial success by the communists, the offensive was thwarted, leaving American generals puzzled over the reasoning of the attack. The battle was successful in decimating the Viet Cong; however, the US lost many points on the political front, as well as the morale of the United States general population.⁸⁴

⁸²Krepinivich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 237.

⁸³Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (January 1969): 214.

⁸⁴Krepinivich, *The Army in Vietnam*, 238-239.

Senior American military leaders used the Tet Offensive as justification to request more forces for Vietnam. General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff urged Westmoreland to request an additional quarter of a million troops for the war effort and to assist the depleted ARVN. The President was not willing to call up the Army Reserve (the only way the request could be met) and instead sent 10,000 more regular army troops to fill the capability gap of the depleted ARVN.⁸⁵

A report from the *Pentagon Papers* from February of 1968 questions the ARVN's ability to recover and refit after the Tet Offensive:

In the new, more dangerous environment to come about in the countryside, and as currently led, motivated, and influenced at the top, ARVN is even less likely than before to buckle down to the crucial offensive job of chasing district companies and (with US help) provincial battalions. In that environment, informers will clam up, or be killed; the VC will get more information and cooperation, the GVN less; officials and the police will be much less willing to act on information on VC suspects and activities.⁸⁶

The public backlash was too much for President Johnson to justify General Westmoreland's continued command of Vietnam. Westmoreland was replaced by his former deputy, General Creighton Abrams in June 1968. Westmoreland was brought home and promoted to Chief of Staff of the United States Army.

Shortly after taking command of MAC-V, General Abrams tasked his Long Range Planning Task Group to examine the current strategy and make recommendations, if needed. The group presented their findings on 20 November 1968, calling for a major change in the MAC-V's operational approach to the war:

⁸⁵Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 167-168.

⁸⁶*Pentagon Papers*, 2:562.

All of our US combat accomplishments have made no significant, positive difference to the rural Vietnamese—for there is still no real security in the countryside. Our large-scale operations have attempted to enable the development of a protective shield. . . . In pressing this objective, however, we have tended to lose sight of why we were driving the enemy back and destroying his combat capability. Destruction of NVA and VC units and individuals—that is, the kill VC syndrome—has become an end in itself—an end that at times has become self defeating. To accomplish the most difficult task of the war—and really the functional reason for the US to be here—that is providing security to the Vietnamese people.⁸⁷

Despite Abrams support behind his staff's "one war" concept, field commanders instead continued to focus on the "kill VC" concept. In units such as 9th Division, the body count numbers remained the primary method of evaluation of subordinate commanders. General Ewell, the 9th Division commander, was promoted to field command of a corps, while ignoring Abrams guidance and attempt at changing the Army's institutional culture. The battle for Hill 937⁸⁸ served as the final catalyst in Washington to change the course of the war into the new concept of Vietnamization.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Krepinivich, *The Army in Vietnam*, 254.

⁸⁸Also known as the Battle of Hamburger Hill. Executed from 10-20 May 1969, the hill was a heavily fortified by the North Vietnamese. The United States conducted a bloody frontal assault and captured the hill, only to leave it a few days later. While it was deemed a tactical victory, the battle caused outrage from the American public. The battle was fought by 101st Airborne Division while losing 56 Americans killed and another 420 wounded. The fighting went on for ten days and the hill was left almost immediately after it was captured. This battle captured the attention of the nation and President Nixon resulting in a personal visit to Vietnam on 30 July 1969. The President changed General Abrams' orders; the "primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of Vietnam." In the process of withdrawing, more emphasis would be put on advisory efforts, a policy fought against with vigor by the Army.

⁸⁹Krepinivich, *The Army in Vietnam*, 254-257.

Vietnamization

The policy of Vietnamization, first announced by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in the summer of 1969, was the policy of turning over the fighting and political responsibilities to the ARVN and RVN. During the process, the United States would provide financial and logistical support to the ARVN as well as building capacity within the ARVN. At the same time, US Forces would begin withdrawing from Vietnam.⁹⁰

The primary challenge in the Vietnamization process was how to get quality officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) into advisory billets in order to begin shifting more responsibility to ARVN units while still providing the US combat multiplier.⁹¹ Douglas Blaufarb's assessment on advisory, pacification and Vietnamization efforts shows little support initially for advisory positions by American soldiers, or by the ARVN:

In fact, the pacification support mission was not popular with ARVN commanders who, naturally, derived their values from the American mentors. It seemed demeaning compared with the main-force war. It also called for tedious, very basic, small-unit operations with little opportunity for dramatic battles using the full panoply of weapons at their command. Success in pacification did not bring glory and promotions. It brought hard, tedious work, nighttime operations, and casualties.⁹²

⁹⁰Hunt, *Pacification*, 269-270.

⁹¹Such combat multipliers would be American artillery support, Close Air Support by the Air Force and medical evacuation assistance.

⁹²Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance 1950 to Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 253.

Despite emphasis from the top, units and individuals were hesitant to sign up for advisory duty.⁹³ However, due to Secretary Laird's and General Abrams emphasis on advisors, the service secretaries eventually complied after units began rotating home without backfills. This allowed for individuals to achieve enough dwell time to participate in advisory duty. These statistics are shown by the dramatic increase in advisors during the following two years. During 1969 to 1970, the advisory strength went from 7,000 personnel to 14,332.⁹⁴

As American forces began withdrawing, NVA forces used the opportunity to continue moving into Cambodia to launch an offensive into South Vietnam in the early part of 1970. President Nixon ordered a joint US-ARVN attack into Cambodia to raid NVA positions. Unfortunately, the battle highlighted many of ARVN's shortcomings which would ultimately plague them for years to come, mainly in their ability to synchronize enablers and large-scale units. As Americans saw President Nixon's actions as expanding the war effort, domestic political concerns caused the President to limit his support of the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in 1971. ARVN forces launched their attack with no US advisors or combat multiplier support. The NVA easily fended off the attack and caused loss of faith in the South Vietnamese Army.⁹⁵

North Vietnam attacked again on 31 March 1972, and was again repulsed by a battered ARVN that still had American advisory and air support within the boundaries of

⁹³This process would be repeated in Iraq and Afghanistan 30 years later during the initial attempts of building Military Transition Teams (MiTTs).

⁹⁴Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 40.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 77-83.

South Vietnam. The final US ground troops left in August of 1972, and support for South Vietnam in terms of military equipment and aid, slowly dried up by 1975. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese on 30 April, ironically 25 years to the date that President Truman first committed aid to Indochina.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Looking at the Vietnam War only in terms of losing or winning fails to show the complexities in which the war was fought; tactically, operationally and strategically. As brought to light by Colonel Summers in his conversation with an NVA counterpart, the US army never lost a battle above the company level, but managed to lose the war.⁹⁷ From the operational and strategic level, initiatives such as CORDS, Vietnamization and the CIDG program in the following chapter showed extreme promise, yet failed in the end.

Dr James Willbanks argues that Vietnamization failed for two reasons. The first was timing, and the second related to the first in building the ARVN in the mirror image of the United States Army. A survey of general officers following the final withdrawal showed that a majority approved of Vietnamization, but believed, along with the advisory effort, was too late.⁹⁸ CORDS can be seen in the same light, in that it was implemented too little too late. As stated by Robert Komer, the first director of CORDS, “The greatest

⁹⁶Ibid., 237-245, 277.

⁹⁷Summers, *On Strategy*, 1.

⁹⁸Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 278.

problem with pacification was that it wasn't tried seriously until too late."⁹⁹ While this chapter touches on the complexities of the war, particularly in regards to population control, chapter 5 addresses the United States Special Forces attempt at controlling the population outside of the South Vietnamese influence through the Civilian Irregular Defense Group.

⁹⁹Nagl, *Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 166.

CHAPTER 4

ORIGINS OF UNITED STATES SPECIAL FORCES

Introduction

Special Operations Forces (SOF)¹⁰⁰ have played a vital role in all wars since World War II. Their ability to conduct operations independently with relative minimal manning (as opposed to larger general purpose forces), make them ideal candidates for conducting counterinsurgency and unconventional operations. The extensive training and overall maturity of Special Forces individuals allow governments to accept more risk in a variety of missions, both in friendly territory and behind enemy lines.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historical context of the United States' Special Forces leading up to the Vietnam War through examples of the precursors to Vietnam-era Special Forces during World War II. The study then traces the origins of the original Special Forces Group, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne). The chapter also provides examples of early Special Forces missions and a brief outline of how a Special Forces Group was organized during the Vietnam War.

Literature Review

As when dealing with any academic study regarding special operations, it is often difficult to find reliable primary source material for study. The task comes a little easier with Vietnam-era US Special Forces, as many have written personal accounts that have

¹⁰⁰Special Operations Forces (SOF) are defined in Joint Publication 1.02 as “Those Active and Reserve Component forces of the Military Services designated by the Secretary of Defense and specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations.”

been published. Additionally, US Special Forces doctrine focusing on unconventional warfare going back to the 1950s exist, which sheds light on the doctrinal expectations, particularly during the formative years of US Special Forces.

A multitude of primary sources exist, by members and leaders of the early US Special Forces. Colonel Aaron Banks' book *From OSS to Green Berets* provides a unique account that covers the entire span of US Special forces beginning with the OSS and the eventual stand-up of a unit (10th Special Forces Group) dedicated to unconventional warfare. Colonel Banks was the first Special Forces commander, commanding 10th Special Forces Group. Additionally, Charles Simpson's *Inside the Green Berets* provides an historical account of the beginnings of US Special Forces. While it is a primary source dealing with his personal experience in Vietnam, he provides an overarching view of Special Forces prior to the Vietnam War and up to the end of the conflict.

Colonel Francis Kelly's monograph "US Special Forces 1961-1971" provides additional background, particularly on the historical context leading up to the primary mission of US Special Forces in Vietnam, advising the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). This historical context explains why the actions of the originators of Special Forces were adequately suited for the mission of unconventional warfare. Finally, the Army Field Manual 31-21 series from 1951 to 1969 provided insight into the evolution of US Special Forces and their roles during the formative years up through and during Vietnam.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹Other key sources the author found useful in studying historical accounts of Special Forces are Han Halberstadt's *War Stories of the Green Berets*, Gordon Rottman's two book *Green Berets in Vietnam* and *Vietnam Airborne*, Christopher Ives' *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, and Shelby Stanton's *Green Berets at War*.

Origins of United States Special Forces

World War II

The use of “special” or “elite” units in North American war dates back to the “frontier wars” of the 18th Century, notably Rogers’ Rangers and various other Ranger-type units.¹⁰² However, modern-day United States Special Operations claim lineage to two formations from World War II; the Operational Security Service (OSS) and the little-known 1st Special Service Force.¹⁰³ Both units were designed to work behind enemy lines to disrupt Axis forces through conducting unconventional warfare and raids.¹⁰⁴

The 1st Special Service Force (SSF) was a joint American-Canadian Force. The idea was conceived by an Englishman named Geoffrey Pike and General George C. Marshall, code-named Operation Plough. The aim was to conduct raids and attack critical points behind enemy lines such as hydroelectric plants in Norway. The 1st SSF was an all-volunteer unit; many of the first members were mountain men, rock climbers, game wardens, and forest rangers. The unit consisted of three regiments, each with two battalions. They wore crossed arrows of the Indian Scouts as their insignia. The unit was trained in airborne operations and snow-skiing operations. They served with distinction in

¹⁰²For more on US Army Rangers and their history, see Robert W. Black’s *Ranger Dawn: The American Ranger from the Colonial Era to the Mexican War*.

¹⁰³For more on the 1st Special Service Force see Robert Burhans’ *The First Special Serve Force: A War History of the North Americans*.

¹⁰⁴Army Field Manual 31-21 (1961), 3; defines unconventional warfare as; “Unconventional warfare consists of the interrelated fields of guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, and subversion against hostile states (resistance). Unconventional warfare operations are conducted in enemy or enemy controlled territory by predominately indigenous personnel usually supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source.”

the Aleutians, North Africa, Italy and southern France. It is rumored that the unit was nicknamed the “Devil’s Brigade” after a diary was found from a dead German Officer describing them as such.¹⁰⁵ The unit was officially disbanded after the European Campaign ended in 1945; however the origins of Special Forces are closely tied to this unit.¹⁰⁶

The other precursor to Special Forces was the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which existed from 1942 to 1945. Led by General William J. Donovan, the OSS conducted unconventional warfare behind enemy lines in Europe. The OSS was an unusual group in that it chose its members from unorthodox population sets. These individuals included missionaries, bartenders, polo players, baseball pitchers, millionaires, and union organizers.¹⁰⁷ Included in this group of individuals was Colonel Aaron Banks, the first commander of 10th Special Forces Group, which was activated in 1952.¹⁰⁸

Two significant groups sprouted from the OSS; the Jedburgh teams and the Operational Groups. The Jedburghs were comprised of a number of three-man teams, consisting of a commanding officer (either American or British), a Dutch, French, or

¹⁰⁵For more on the Devil’s Brigade see Robert Adleman’s *The Devil’s Brigade* and John Nadler’s *A Perfect Hell: The True Story of the Black Devils, the Forefathers of the Special Forces*.

¹⁰⁶Francis Kelly, *US Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973), 3-4.

¹⁰⁷Colonel Aaron Bank’s book *From OSS to Green Berets* provides a primary source account of the World War II Office of Strategic Services.

¹⁰⁸Charles Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets: The First Thirty Years* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 12.

Belgium officer and an enlisted radio man. These men would parachute behind enemy lines to join resistance forces, coordinate guerilla attacks and conduct unconventional warfare while Allied forces advanced. In addition to coordinating attacks, they provided training for guerilla forces in the use of equipment and weapons training. Colonel Aaron Banks was a member of the Jedburgh teams, serving in both German-controlled France, and later Germany.¹⁰⁹

The Operational Groups consisted of 15-man teams with the intent of inserting behind enemy lines to harass and deter the enemy from friendly main attacks. The men that made up these teams were often first or second generation Americans with advanced language abilities; they could pass for native speakers in their designated country. Teams consisted of specialists within the fields of medicine, weapons and communications, and were specific to a single assigned country (i.e. the French Operational Group) which was under German occupation. The Operational Group model served as a precursor to the modern day Operational Detachment teams of US Special Forces.¹¹⁰

Despite the success of the OSS during WWII, the OSS was disbanded in 1945, but was reborn in a different form as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1947. With the advent of the Atomic Age, the idea of fighting guerilla warfare was at a standstill. However, General Robert McClure was able to convince the Pentagon leadership that unconventional assets were still necessary for conflicts short of “full

¹⁰⁹Aaron Banks, *From OSS to Green Berets: The Birth of Special Forces* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 24.

¹¹⁰Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 12.

blown” conventional war. For this reason, the Special Warfare Division was created.¹¹¹

McClure gathered several individuals that had served in the OSS during WWII. Colonel Banks was the Operations Chief for this new division.¹¹²

Birth of United States’ Special Forces

The mission given to Colonel Banks from General McClure was to develop a unit capable of doing two missions. The first was to be prepared to conduct unconventional warfare behind enemy lines. The second was to train guerillas capable of conducting guerilla operations in support of revolutionary war or in support of larger offensive operations. While the two missions may seem contradictory, they actually compliment each other, as demonstrated during Special Forces operations in the latter half of the 20th century.¹¹³ This combination is visible in the initial definition of the three legs of unconventional warfare as defined in the 1961 version of FM 31-21: guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, and subversion against hostile states (resistance).¹¹⁴ The 1961 manual (which remains consistent with current doctrine), attempted to address a wide variety of Special Forces to ensure they could not be boxed into any specific mission set.

¹¹¹The initial number to man this force was 250 officers and soldiers that could be pushed down to units to fulfill the unconventional requirement. See Banks, 143-144.

¹¹²Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 17.

¹¹³Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 1. Examples of this friction can be seen in Vietnam with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹¹⁴Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 31-21, *Guerilla Warfare* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961), 3.

Special Forces in Europe

10th Special Forces Group was officially raised at Fort Bragg in 1952.¹¹⁵ The unit trained and received certification in Special Forces operations and then relocated to Europe in 1953. Immediately they began preparation for operations in countries which might be involved in future wars of national liberation. After establishing a foothold in Germany, 10th Group began liaising to other countries to conduct joint training with their elite units, establishing key relationships in areas of the world which might play a critical role in future wars.¹¹⁶

US Special Forces trained with French, British, Norwegian, Italian, Turkish, Greek, Iranian and Spanish forces. These countries accepted 10th Group's willingness to conduct joint training, particularly in guerilla warfare. Not only was joint training being conducted, but strong relationships were being formed in the event a small nucleus would need to be established for any future war in Europe. These actions would serve as the catalyst for changes in Special Forces doctrine, since 10th Group was essentially "learning on the go."¹¹⁷

Expansion of US Special Forces

The stay-behind elements of 10th Group in North Carolina formed the nucleus of 77th Special Forces Group (which would later become 7th Special Forces Group) at Fort

¹¹⁵It was named the 10th Group in the hope it would confuse the Soviets to how many Special Forces units the United States actually had.

¹¹⁶Aaron Banks, *From OSS to Green Berets: The Birth of Special Forces* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 190-204.

¹¹⁷Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 46-47.

Bragg, North Carolina. The intent was to mirror the effects of 10th Group as well as provide a backfill for Special Forces soldiers in Europe. 77th Group conducted similar training to what 10th Group was doing. Following this, 1st Group was established in Hawaii, and would have responsibility for Southeast Asia. Expansion continued despite challenges from the general purpose forces regarding the formation of Special Forces. After being relocated to Okinawa, Japan, 1st Group began operations in Southeast Asia to include Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, setting the conditions for early Special Forces involvement in the Vietnam conflict. As early as 1957, they were training Vietnamese commandos and providing Mobile Training Teams to Laos and Thailand.¹¹⁸

Early Special Forces in Vietnam

The initial efforts of US Special Forces were to assist in establishing a Vietnamese Special Forces formation that was capable of being trained in unconventional warfare with the aim of developing anti-communist assets in accord with the “domino theory” of US foreign policy.¹¹⁹ As of 1957, the South Vietnamese Army had no special forces units in their military. In early 1957, seventy specially selected officers and sergeants from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam received airborne and communications training in Vung Tau. Fifty eight of the initial seventy were sent to Nha

¹¹⁸Shelby L. Stanton, *U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), 16-34.

¹¹⁹The Domino Theory states that if one country fell to communism, then others around it would fall as well. This lens of international relations ultimately led to the Kennedy administration and later Johnson’s administration in justifying action in South Vietnam.

Trang to undergo four months of commando training by twelve members of the 14th Special Forces Detachment from 1st Special Forces Group.¹²⁰

Forty-four completed the training and became the nucleus of the Vietnamese 1st Observation Group, under the command and control of the “Sixth Office,” a counter-espionage unit that reported directly to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) President Diem. This unit eventually grew to 400-soldiers strong and changed its name to the South Vietnamese 77th Special Group, after the original designation of the US 7th Special Forces Group.¹²¹ In 1961, members from 1st Special Forces Group came to Vietnam to continue training the South Vietnamese 77th Special Group in weapons techniques, medical training, demolitions training and guerilla-oriented operations.¹²²

On 15 March 1963, the Vietnamese Special Forces Command (Luc-Luong-Dac-Biet or simply LLDB) was formed to command and control the expanding Vietnamese Special Forces. It was originally headquartered in Saigon, but was moved to the more centralized location of Nha Trang along with Headquarters US Special Forces (Provisional). The LLDB was then put in command of the Civilian Irregular Defense Program (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5) with US Special Forces as advisors, yet the US kept control of the resources such as pay, weapons, etc to maintain influence over the program. This “marriage” was not perfect. The LLDB and US Special Forces often had disagreements on how the CIDG program should operate, but more often than not,

¹²⁰Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 35.

¹²¹7th Special Forces Group was originally designated as 77th Special Forces Group.

¹²²Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 36-38.

the two organizations worked reasonably well together. There will be more discussion of this in the next chapter. Towards the end of the war, under Vietnamization, the LLDB would play a significant role in transitioning the CIDG into the regular army (and other government agencies such as the Regional and Popular Forces–RF/PF).¹²³

5th Special Forces Group

Rational

5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was stood up at Fort Bragg, North Carolina on 21 September 1961. Its initial purpose was to train United States Special Forces (USSF) teams for service in Vietnam.¹²⁴ Operation Switchback¹²⁵ would transfer control of Special Forces and the CIDG program from the Central Intelligence Agency command and control to Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MAC-V). Until 5th Special Group arrived in Vietnam, all USSF activities would be controlled by Special Forces (Provisional), Vietnam, a staff section within the MAC-V command structure.¹²⁶

The decision was made to bring 5th Special Forces Group to Vietnam for two component parts. The first reason was to take pressure off 1st and 7th Special Forces groups and their respective global responsibilities. The second reason had to do with providing continuity to the training and advising mission. Having a permanent headquarters allowed for a permanent change of station, rather than the more expensive

¹²³Gordon Rottman, *Vietnam Airborne* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1990), 30-32.

¹²⁴Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 87.

¹²⁵Operation Switchback will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

¹²⁶Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 45-46.

method of temporary duty that most Special Forces soldiers had enjoyed in the previous years. It also extended soldiers tours from six months to one year. Extending tours to a year allowed for the USSF teams to have better continuity, rather than members changing out on a constant basis. This was a critical aspect for the Special Forces A teams to operate effectively.¹²⁷

Having a Group Headquarters centrally located in Nha Trang would allow for better coordination with not only MAC-V, but the Vietnamese Special Forces Command as well. This also allowed the Group Commander to better integrate the CIDG program into the country-wide pacification efforts. This change in structure also fit with providing matching command structure continuity within each corps zone of control, both American and Vietnamese. The group commander would work directly with the MAC-V commander and staff and the respective Special Forces companies (C teams) and B teams¹²⁸ worked directly with their respective corps commanders.¹²⁹

¹²⁷Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 88.

¹²⁸See next section for definition and description of A, B, and C Teams.

¹²⁹Kelly, *U.S. Special Forces*, 45-46.

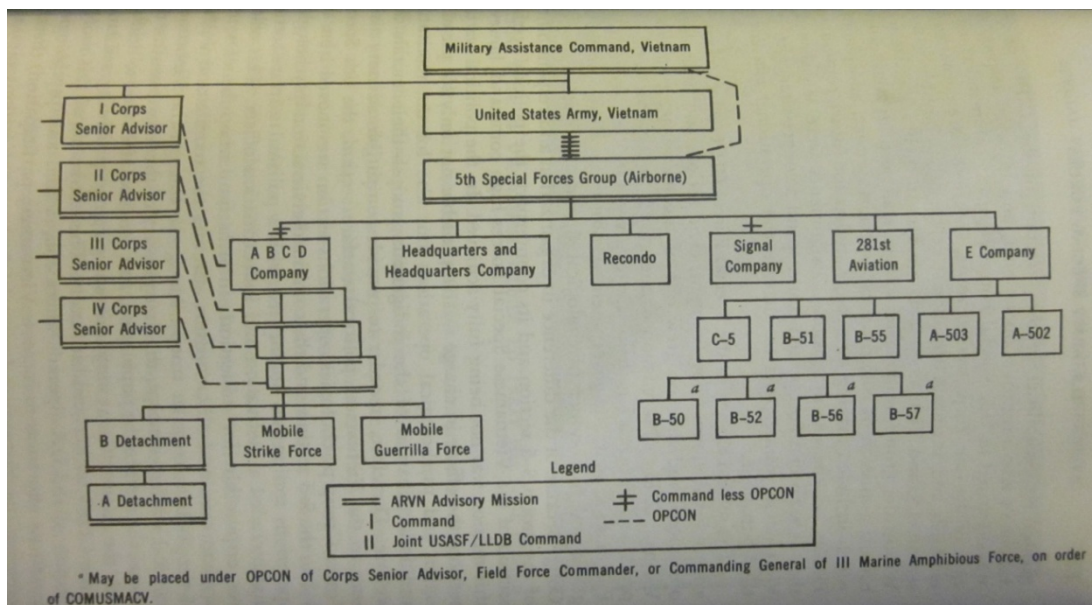


Figure 1. 5th Special Forces Group Command Relationships
Source: Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 123.

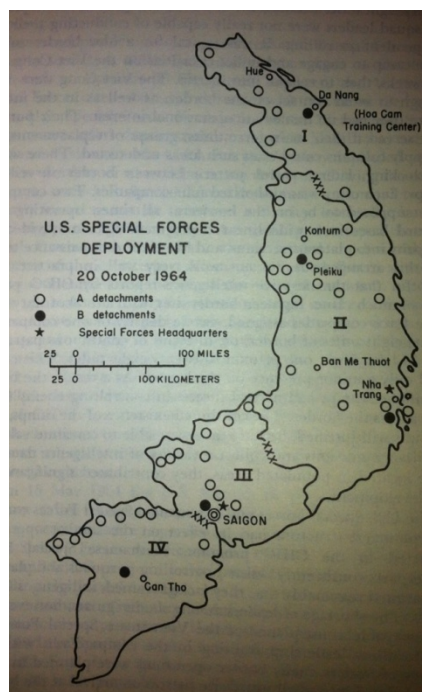


Figure 2. 5th Special Forces Group area of responsibility map as of 20 October 1964
Source: Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 51.

Composition and Structure

5th Special Forces Group's composition and structure mirrored that of the other Special Forces groups at the beginning of the Vietnam War. The Special Forces group was robust and designed to operate independently if needed. At the group-level (see figure 3), there was a Headquarters and Headquarters Company comprising of all of the staff sections (see figure 4), a signal company, an aviation company, and the four Special Forces companies or "C" detachments. The companies were commanded by a lieutenant colonel with three operational "B" detachments, commanded by a major (see figure 5). The companies consisted of an operational detachment (B teams) and an administrative detachment. The B detachments in turn commanded the heart of the Special Forces; four "A" detachments.¹³⁰

A detachments,¹³¹ also known as Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) consisted normally of 12 men,¹³² commanded by a captain, with a first-lieutenant as second in command. Each ODA had an operations sergeant, two medical sergeants, two communication sergeants, two demolitions sergeants, two weapons sergeants (one heavy and one light), and an intelligence sergeant. During the Vietnam War, this standard set

¹³⁰Kelly, *U.S. Special Forces*, 7. Later during the Vietnam War, B detachments would command up to eight ODAs.

¹³¹Also known as "A teams."

¹³²Later in the Vietnam War, A detachments were expanded to 14 men to meet the mission requirements.

was often modified to meet the specific mission requirements, as well as expanding from 12 to 14 personnel.¹³³

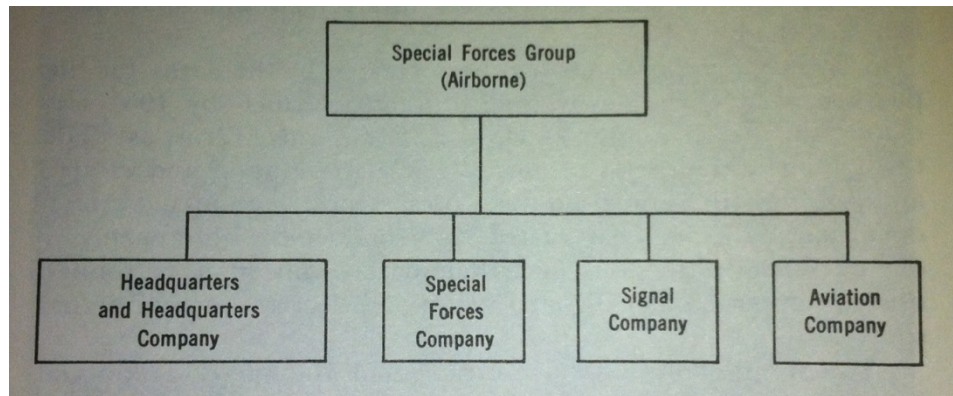


Figure 3. Special Forces Group (Airborne)

Source: Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 10.

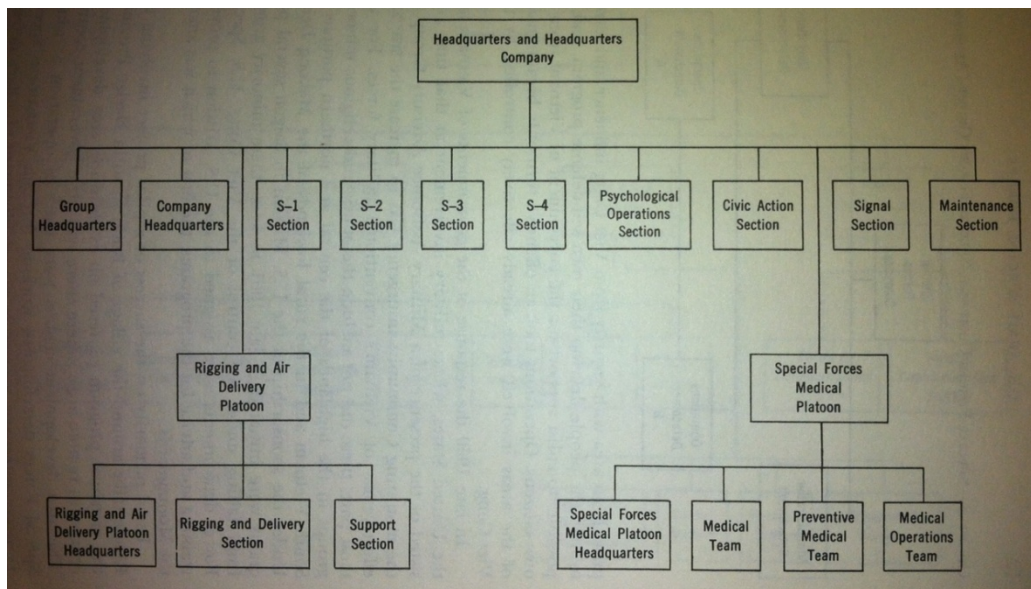


Figure 4. Special Forces Group Headquarters and Headquarters Company

Source: Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 11.

¹³³Gordon Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing: 2007), 30.

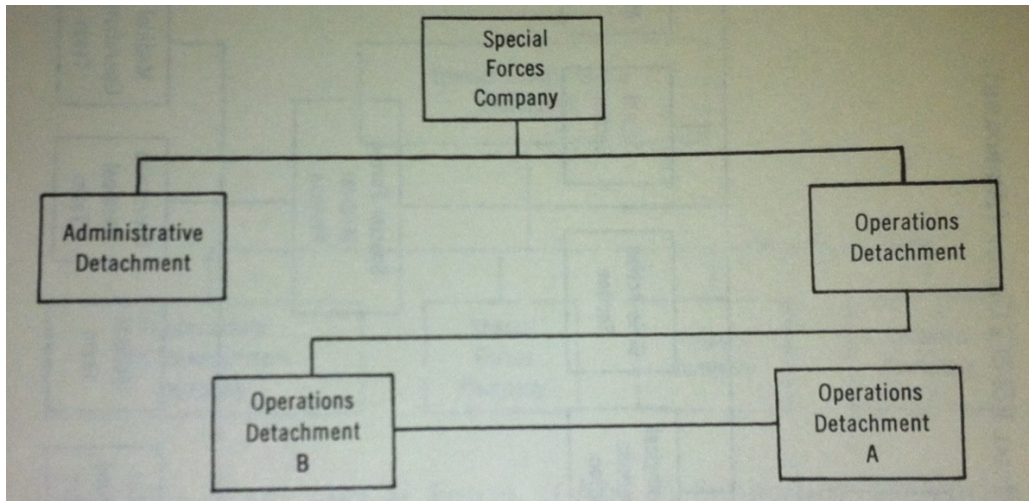


Figure 5. Special Forces Company and B Team

Source: Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 12.

Detachment Commander	Captain	Team Leader
Executive Officer	1st Lieut.	XO or jokingly, "Excess Officer"
Operations Sergeant	Master Sgt.	Team Sergeant
Heavy Weapons Leader	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Heavy Weapons Man
Intelligence Sergeant	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Intel Sergeant
Light Weapons Leader	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Light Weapons Man
Medical Specialist	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Senior or Team Medic
Radio Operator Supervisor	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Senior Radio Operator
Assistant Medical Specialist	Staff Sgt.	Junior Medic
Demolitions Sergeant	Staff Sgt.	Engineer Sgt.
Chief Radio Operator	Sgt.	Junior Radio Operator
Combat Demolitions Specialist	Spec. 5	Demo Man

Figure 6. Composition of a Special Forces A Team–Vietnam

Source: Gordon Rottman, *Green Beret in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 14.

Mission

The Special Forces generic role leading up to the Vietnam War as stated by Colonel Francis Kelly, a former 5th Group commander, was to “assume any responsibility and carry out any mission assigned to it by the Army.”¹³⁴ Its missions were varied because of the Special Forces ability to tailor a flexible command structure to accomplish any mission. They could infiltrate by land, sea or air for the purpose of destroying strategic targets, as well as train indigenous personnel to do the same.

The Vietnam conflict¹³⁵ brought a new mission, different than that envisioned during the 1950s; training indigenous personnel inside friendly lines, later to become known as Foreign Internal Defense (FID). During their involvement with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, US Special Forces would advise Vietnamese Special Forces, who in name, commanded the CIDG. In reality, US Special Forces advised and in many instances, commanded the CIDG units across the highlands of South Vietnam. CIDG units were initially under the command and control of the CIA, but later transferred to MAC-V control, then later under 5th Special Forces Group. With the inception of Mobile Strike Forces (MSF), USSF commanded these units with no Vietnamese SF, instead allowing for a shadow chain of command made up of the irregular forces composing of the MSF.¹³⁶

¹³⁴Kelly, *U.S. Special Forces*, 9.

¹³⁵Addressed here as the “Vietnam Conflict” due to US Special Forces conducting the same duties during both the advisory years and the actual war conducted by the United States.

¹³⁶Kelly, *U.S. Special Forces*, 8-10.

Conclusion

Starting from the seeds of World War II organizations disbanded following the end of the war to becoming a regular army unit was impressive. What is most interesting about Special Forces is the ability to do so much, while remaining flexible in mission sets. This flexibility not only gave life to the organization, but ensured its existence through a diversity of missions worldwide.

While the Special Forces primary mission was to operate behind enemy lines to conduct unconventional warfare, a new mission was added in the form of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). This change in direction, served as the catalyst for conducting unconventional warfare within friendly lines, further expanding the roles and missions US Special Forces would take on.¹³⁷ This new role focused on population control as opposed to the preliminary mission of conducting unconventional warfare. This new mission would eventually change the course of US Special Forces doctrine as well in dealing with population control, which ultimately would come in the form of FID. The following chapter examines USSF's efforts in population control through the CIDG.

¹³⁷Kelly, *U.S. Special Forces*, 10.

CHAPTER 5

SPECIAL FORCES IN VIETNAM

Introduction

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), began in 1961 with the intent of denying a significant percentage of the minority populations (mainly in the mountainous or highland regions neglected by the government) in South Vietnam from being used by the North Vietnamese for the insurgency or as sympathizers Viet Cong. For the South Vietnamese and American Special Forces advisors, this area was a crucial buffer zone between the 17th Parallel (and Saigon), and for controlling the infiltration routes from the Ho Chi Minh trail that ran along with the highlands in the adjoining Laos and Cambodia. COL Francis Kelly, former commander of 5th Special Forces group, stated that the CIDG program in the early 1960s was conceived for two principal reasons:

One was that the US Mission in Saigon believed that a paramilitary force should be developed from the minority groups of South Vietnam in order to strengthen and broaden the counterinsurgency effort of the Vietnam government. The second was that the Montagnards and other minority groups were prime targets for Communist propaganda, partly because of their dissatisfaction from the Vietnamese government, and it was important to prevent the Viet Cong from recruiting them and taking complete control of their large and strategic land holdings.¹³⁸

This chapter evaluates how well US Special Forces (USSF) controlled the population through the Civilian Irregular Defense Group and USSF's various agendas as the program evolved throughout the Vietnam War. It deals with the ethnic minority (Montagnards) used by Special Forces and tensions between the South Vietnamese and

¹³⁸Kelly, *US Army Special Forces: 1961-1971*, 19.

Montagnards throughout the campaign. Additionally, the chapter covers the transition of the CIDG program under CIA control to Military Assistance Group–Vietnam during Operation Switchback. Following Switchback, the chapter looks into how the CIDG program transitioned from a defensive mission to an offensive posture in the form of the Mobile Strike Forces (MSF). Finally, the chapter evaluates the transition of CIDG and MSF to South Vietnamese military formal control during Vietnamization.

Key Sources for Studying the Civilian Irregular Defense Group

Key sources for studying the Special Forces in the Vietnam conflict stem from various primary sources to numerous secondary sources that cover the particular mission of US Special Forces. As with any publication regarding Special Forces, operational security levels provide a barrier to producing accurate information that is readily available in the unclassified realm of academic study and research. Charles Simpson's *Inside the Green Berets* presents one of the most complete primary source accounts to compliment various secondary accounts of the Green Berets in Vietnam. Simpson served as both the deputy commander and commander of 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam during the CIDG program, primarily with the Mobile Strike Forces.

Colonel Francis J. Kelly, a former 5th Group Commander in Vietnam wrote a comprehensive hybrid primary / secondary source (and US Army-sanctioned) study of US Army Special Forces in Vietnam and their efforts titled *Vietnam Studied: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971*. The study looks at the execution of the CIDG program, both before and after large-scale US intervention in Vietnam. Kelly goes into detail regarding the standing up of the CIDG program as a defensive measure to control the population to the transition of the offensively-focused Mobile Strike Forces.

Shelby L. Stanton, who served as a Captain in 5th Special Forces Group during Vietnam, wrote a secondary source in *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*. His account details how US Special Forces developed prior to the Vietnam War and were in position to fulfill President Kennedy's mandate regarding counterinsurgency operations. The remainder of his book offers a primary source account of the CIDG program and the evolution of US Special Forces into the 1960s and 1970s from the perspective of a Special Forces team leader. This paper also draws upon Gordon Rottman's *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam: 1966-1970*, *Vietnam Airborne*, and *Green Berets in Vietnam*. These books provide detailed secondary source accounts of the evolution of Special Forces' role as they were turned from a defensive focus to an offensive focus in the development of the Mobile Strike Forces of the CIDG.

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group: The Beginnings

Ethnic Makeup of Civilian Irregular Defense Group

The CIDG program primarily influenced the Montagnard population. The Montagnards,¹³⁹ translated as "Mountain People" from French, did not see themselves as South Vietnamese (they called South Vietnamese "lowlanders"). Additionally, the South Vietnamese did not consider the Montagnards to be citizens of South Vietnam and were objects of discrimination by the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The Montagnards had been treated poorly by the South Vietnamese lowlanders, French colonial governments and the new RVN in the post 1954 era with empty promises dating back generations. They were

¹³⁹The Montagnards consisted of several different sub-tribes within the overarching term of "Mountain People" or Montagnards. For simplicity, this paper will refer to the various tribes as simply "Montagnards."

known from previous conflicts as being hardened, proud warriors that were content with village and tribal living. Prior to 1954, few people lived in the highlands of South Vietnam, but there was an influx of the Montagnards due to the mass migration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam following the 1954 Geneva peace agreement.¹⁴⁰

The Montagnard population consists of 13 primary tribes and numerous other small tribes. For purposes of this paper, all tribes will be referred to as “Montagnards.” The majority of the Montagnards shared a common culture. Tribal dialects were closely related and mutually intelligible thus allowing US Special Forces to have a base of credibility amongst several different tribes within the Montagnard culture, once they understood the culture in general.¹⁴¹

Critical to the success of the CIDG program was the need to fortify villages and make the Montagnards capable of their own defense (primarily by rearming the towns with weapons previously confiscated by the government) against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese influence. This would not be the first time the Montagnards would serve as area defenders, as it was part of their culture to preserve the lands they occupied. The eventual turnover to South Vietnamese government control was one end state for the CIDG program; however, this was an extremely difficult task given the South Vietnamese views of the Montagnards as an inferior race. The South Vietnamese also did not trust the Montagnards’ fierce independence, ultimately leading to a Montagnard mutiny in which some Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB) were killed in 1964. This only

¹⁴⁰Christopher K. Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15-16.

¹⁴¹*Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Vietnam* (US Army Intelligence School: January 1970), 1-21.

furthered extreme animosity between the Montagnards and the RVN. Consequently, the RVN supported the CIDG program with reservations. While some of the South Vietnamese Special Forces provided support, many tensions remained; in the end it was clearly an American-led and financed program. These tensions between the Montagnards and South Vietnamese would later serve as pitfalls for future operations.¹⁴²

Buon Enao Experiment

The initial mission leading to the establishment of the CIDG program by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was a patrol into the central lands of the Montagnard population by a US Special Forces Medic, Paul Jones, and a US Mission representative to assess the willingness of the Montagnards to become a part of a paramilitary force capable of keeping the Viet Cong out of the villages. Jones provided medical care to the village of Buon Enao, which would become the test bed for the CIDG program. Jones and the US Mission representative quickly won over the villages through tangible medical care and quick-win civic action projects to establish a better quality of life for the communities. The initial success of Jones and the US Mission representative showed the possibility of expanding the efforts to surrounding villages.¹⁴³

The medic's understanding of the local culture, for instance, using "witch doctors" (part of the Montagnard's belief system) to assist in medical services was significant. Actions such as these displayed the willingness of US Special Forces to work within the customs of the tribes, rather than attempt to change them. With the initial

¹⁴²Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 20-24.

¹⁴³Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 15-16.

success of Jones and the US Mission representative, a US Special Forces A Team¹⁴⁴ and Vietnamese Special Forces members¹⁴⁵ were inserted into Buon Enao. They assisted in building a fortified fence around the village and getting the RVN to give back weapons such as spears and crossbows for village protection. The village elders agreed and publicly pledged that no Viet Cong would be allowed in the village.¹⁴⁶

The second part of the CIDG program was the development of the Village Strike Forces for external security and protection, the precursor to the Mobile Strike Forces (MSF) or “MIKE Forces.” Part of the agreement with village elders was not only would everyone in the village need to agree to assist with the village defense inside, but also that a sufficient number of volunteers would be needed to create a part of the strike force outside of the fortified compound for patrols and reaction to enemy attacks. Primarily the Vietnamese Special Forces trained selected individuals with oversight by US Special Forces advisors for the Village Strike Forces. These selected groups of individuals were trained with M1 and M3 carbines in activities such as marksmanship, patrolling, ambushes, counter-ambushes, and quick reaction to enemy attacks on the village.¹⁴⁷

Following the US Special Forces departure from the Buon Enao village complex, Special Forces A Teams began expanding the program to surrounding villages. Special Forces sought a similar aim of controlling the population and developing at least a neutral

¹⁴⁴See chapter 4 for a description and makeup of the various Special Forces organizational structure.

¹⁴⁵The South Vietnamese Special Forces Team consisted of several members of the Rhade sub-tribe, the tribe where most of the Montagnards in Buon Enao were from.

¹⁴⁶Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 15-18.

¹⁴⁷Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 26-27.

to friendly relationship between the Montagnards and the South Vietnamese Government. An Australian¹⁴⁸ captain by the name of Barry Peterson moved into Buon Enao in August 1963 to begin working with the Montagnards, made up mostly of the southern Rhade tribe.¹⁴⁹ Peterson had two years of experience in Malaya, and was no stranger to the buildup of irregular counterinsurgent forces. Peterson took the work US Special Forces had done and continued to expand on it for the next two years. At one point, he led over 1,000 Montagnards in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group. For his time there in the Darlac Province, Peterson was made an honorary chief within the Rhade tribe. He was also instrumental in assisting US Special Forces in quelling the Montagnard rebellion in 1964.¹⁵⁰

Expansion of the CIDG Program

The success of the program was not purely reliant on offensive and defensive measures in controlling the population. Civic development programs within the village and surrounding areas were given emphasis. Special Forces and US Mission representatives (to include USAID, Army and Navy Engineers) conducted training clinics through “train the trainer” programs to assist the Montagnards in providing

¹⁴⁸The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) came to Vietnam in 1962 to assist in advising the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Shortly after coming into theater they established a relationship with USSF and began augmenting their force in the CIDG camps and later in the Mobile Strike Force Commands. While a majority of their advisory duties fell in line with USSF, they still provided some advisors to the ARVN mission.

¹⁴⁹The Rhade tribe of the Montagnards made up a majority of the personnel in the southern highlands, and also the makeup of the CIDG in general.

¹⁵⁰Ian McNeil, *The Team: The Australian Advisers in Vietnam 1962-1972* (London: Leo Cooper, 1980), 32-67.

developmental programs to enhance their quality of life. Teams were organized to train competent Montagnards who in turn would train the villages on the use of simple tools, methods of planting crops, subsequent care of crops, and blacksmithing. Combined with the medical assistance through mobile clinics by Special Forces medics and “witch doctors,” it gave significant credibility to the program resulting in other villages within the Montagnard tribal culture ultimately volunteering for the program. US Special Forces did not intend to change the tribal culture, but rather work within the existing customs and traditions.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 27-28.

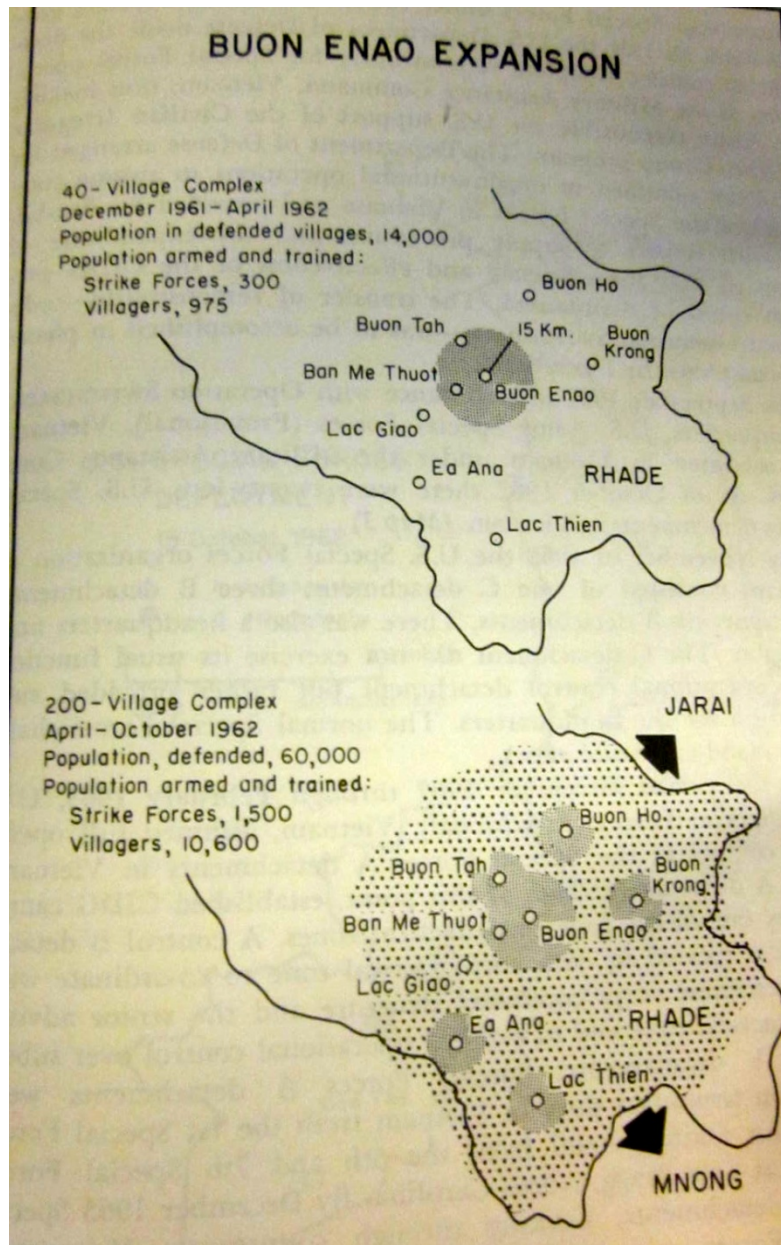


Figure 7. The expansion of the Buon Enao Project by US Special Forces
 Source: Francis Kelly, *US Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973), 29.

The success of the Buon Enao experiment quickly spread to surrounding villages to include Buon Ho, Buon Krong, Ea Ana, Lac Tien, and Buon Tah, as more Special Forces A Teams came into theater. With forty of the Rhade villages participating in the

CIDG program, it allowed the tribes to reinforce each other's villages in the case of an overwhelming attack by Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces. Success of the Rhade CIDG quickly spread to the rest of the Darlac Province resulting in over 200 villages participating in the program by August of 1962. The success also caused a significant expansion of Special Forces in not only in Vietnam, but in the United States in the early to mid 1960s. It increased not only the need for A team advisors, but the need for centralized command and control as well, and was the justification for standing up 5th Special Forces Group to eventually take command of the Special Forces A, B and C teams in Vietnam. The 5th Special Forces Group commander saw the need for expansion in the following ways:

- 1: Establish a base camp for training Strike force and village defenders;
- 2: Conduct an Area Development Program to bring the local population under government influence;
- 3: Employ paramilitary forces in combat operations to train hamlet militias, carry out interdiction activities, and conduct joint operations with ARVN units with such operations furthered the CIDG effort;
- 4: Conduct PSYOP operations to develop popular support for the GVN;
- 5: Establish an area intelligence program including, but not limited, to reconnaissance patrols, observations posts and agent information networks;
- 6: Conduct a Civil Affairs (CA) program
- 7: Where appropriate, establish border screen in sectors along the RVN international border. During the development phase, all reasonable means were to be taken to improve the economic situation of the local population by purchasing materials and hiring local labor for construction and operation of the camp.¹⁵²

One CIDG camp established by A Team 333 was the Chi Linh camp, located approximately 11 miles southeast of An Loc, the capital of the Binh Long Province. The camp was established to interdict NVA and VC movement along "Serge's Jungle Highway," an offshoot of the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through Cambodia, 25 miles to

¹⁵²Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 18-20.

the northwest. The camp was built directly on a trail, resulting in terrain control fights between the CIDG camp and NVA forces. The NVA forces moved the trail four miles east of the camp, but interdiction remained the primary mission for the CIDG forces stationed there. The camp incorporated South Vietnamese 105mm howitzers inside the camp for additional protection and firepower. Additionally, US 155mm howitzers could be used, along with Close Air Support.¹⁵³

Logistical Aspects

The logistical component of the program was essential to the initial success of the CIDG program. Since the program was officially led by the US Mission and funded through the Central Intelligence Agency, procurement of supplies and unorthodox requests were met with relative ease, which in reality would have been a significant hurdle through the Army's normal logistical program. Had the logistical support of the CIDG program been reliant on the RVN or the Army supply system, it is doubtful that the effects on the initial stages of the CIDG program would have been as successful as they were, mainly in being able to get necessary supplies quickly and efficiently. This would lead to complications as the program transitioned to MAC-V control, and then subsequently to South Vietnamese control during Vietnamization.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³Gordon Rottman, *Green Beret in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 24-32.

¹⁵⁴Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 26-27.

Transition of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group from CIA supported
to MAG-V Control (Operation Switchback)

With the mandated expansion of the CIDG in 1962, the program needed more command and control to provide oversight. The US Mission's capability to oversee such a large expansion was infeasible. These concerns over CIA command and control stemmed from the 1961 Bay of Pigs debacle which resulted in National Security Action Memorandum (NASM) 57. NASM 57 stated that any program under the CIA that overextended their resources would be transferred to the Department of Defense (DOD). This effectively ensured transfer of the CIDG program to the DOD.¹⁵⁵

Under "Operation Switchback" all logistical procedures would have to fall under the normal Army supply system, thus reducing efficiency the CIDG program had enjoyed during the initial stages,¹⁵⁶ This transition of command also led to a change in the mission for US Special Forces. Under US Mission command for direction, such as the Buon Enao project, the priority was centered around village defense, development, and population control.

The new command emphasis from MAC-V began to shift from defensive population control measures to building offensive strike forces that were capable of conducting local patrols and ambushes along the border. MAC-V established five priorities for the CIDG: Harass and block infiltration corridors, harass enemy lines of communication, harass Viet Cong secret bases, collect intelligence, and participate in

¹⁵⁵Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), 51-52.

¹⁵⁶Switchback was the name given to the operation, which would become the main effort of MAC-V until completion in July 1963.

offensive operations.¹⁵⁷ The focus now became offensive operations against the Viet Cong, a shift that would change the US Special Forces role in Vietnam for the remainder of the conflict and begin the conventionalization¹⁵⁸ of the CIDG.¹⁵⁹

The rapid expansion of the CIDG mission led to initial failures that would plague the project for the remainder of the war. The expansion of the program (and the limited amount of Special Forces advisors available for the mission requirement), resulted in villages turned over to South Vietnamese Special Forces before they were fully capable to control and advise the villages. While this allowed US Special Forces to open up more CIDG camps, camps that were left to the LLDB experienced reduced effectiveness. Ethnic tensions between the Montagnards and South Vietnamese Special Forces would add to the problems with turning over subsequent villages to the RVN.¹⁶⁰

The first failure came during the initial stages of the CIDG program. The Buon Enao camp was deemed to be the first village ready for turnover to the LLDB. There was now little to no US oversight to avoid abuse, corruption and ensure the relationships established between USSF, Australian advisors, LLDB, and village leaders were not destroyed. While some CIDG forces maintained their status, civilian irregulars were often converted into Regular South Vietnamese Army forces. Montagnard loyalty remained

¹⁵⁷Military Assistance Command–Vietnam, Command History, 1965, 62-63.

¹⁵⁸This conventionalization refers to transition of CIDG personnel being defensively focused to offensively-minded units that later in the war would be looked at as additional infantry battalions by MAC-V.

¹⁵⁹Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 45.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 41.

confined to their village and culture, not the Army of the Republic of Vietnam or the RVN.¹⁶¹

The hasty transition led to three problems for the CIDG program and future implications later in the Vietnam War. The first was the Montagnards were proud of their internal CIDG program, and wanted nothing to do with the RVN, other than mutual cooperation. This resulted in CIDG strike forces unwilling to cooperate with regular South Vietnamese armed forces. The second issue was the hasty transition to South Vietnamese control did not achieve the same effects as the CIDG program led by US Special Forces. CIDG camps that were used to the high quality of US Special Forces advisory mission (and resources) would ultimately be degraded by the LLDB. The final problem was the financing and logistical system. Before, US Special Forces were able to procure whatever they needed to accomplish the mission through US Mission and CIA logistical channels. With Operation Switchback turning logistical authority over to the US Army and the RVN, it led to critical shortages in supplies and capabilities for civic action, particularly as villages were turned over to South Vietnamese control.¹⁶²

Colonel Kelly summed up The failure of the initial stages of transition of authority of the CIDG program to Vietnamese control:

The reasons for the failure in on the Buon Ena turnover can be summarized as the follows: mutual suspicion and hostility between the Rhade and Vietnamese province and district officials; overly generous distribution by US agencies of weapons and ammunition to tribesmen whose reaction to government enforced repossession of some weapons was understandably hostile; apparent disregard on the part of the Vietnam government for the interests, desires, and sensitivities of the Montagnards; inadequate Vietnamese government and logistical support; and,

¹⁶¹Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 41-44.

¹⁶²Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 52-54.

finally, the failure of US authorities to anticipate these difficulties and avoid them.¹⁶³

These concerns would come to light as tensions increased between the Montagnards and the South Vietnamese army, in particular the LLDB, leading to a mutiny by some of the CIDG. In September of 1964, Montagnards from several villages turned on their South Vietnamese Special Forces advisors, killing 19 and taking prisoners the remaining Vietnamese forces. It was not until US Special Forces stepped in to act as mediators and stop the Montagnard rebellion. The uprising ultimately led to better living conditions and respect for the Montagnards by the RVN.¹⁶⁴

The initial success of the CIDG program can be attributed to the defensive or “hold” nature of the camps established in the first few years of the project. Senior leaders in Vietnam were not satisfied with only a stated “hold” mission. This would cause US Special Forces to build up offensive capabilities within the CIDG program in accordance with MAC-V command direction. These new forces would come to be known as the Mobile Strike Forces (MSF) or “MIKE Forces.”

Mobile Strike Forces (MIKE Forces)

The concept of the Mobile Strike Forces (MSF) resulted from the need of a quick reaction force to assist CIDG camps. While several CIDG camps were considered to be secure, many camps still ran the risk of being overrun by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong. Special Forces created the Mobile Strike Forces to provide quick reaction capability throughout each C Team’s area of operation. Additionally, 5th Special Forces

¹⁶³Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 43-44.

¹⁶⁴Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 79-83.

Group also maintained a Mobile Strike Force at the group-level in order to provide additional combat power where the 5th Group commander saw fit.¹⁶⁵

Other large-scale conventional attacks by the NVA and Viet Cong led to additional CIDG camps being overrun or suffering significant personnel casualties. In 1963, the CIDG camps of Hiep Hoa and Tan Phu were overrun resulting in all survivors being marched off to Viet Cong prison camps.¹⁶⁶ These actions proved that if the CIDG camps were going to remain viable, camp defenses were not enough.

One high-profile incident suggesting the need for the establishment of a dedicated quick reaction force (QRF) occurred in 1964 when Captain Roger Donlon's Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) Team and CIDG camp was in danger of being overrun in Nam Dong. Captain Donlon was wounded several times, made repeated attempts at rescuing both American and Vietnamese wounded personnel and was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions (the first American to be awarded the Medal of Honor in the Vietnam War). Donlon's camp was one of many camps receiving heavy casualties. As a QRF did not exist at the time of Donlon's experience, it would provide justification for the development of specialized assault forces through the Mobile Strike Force concept.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵Gordon Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey, 2007), 5-6.

¹⁶⁶Three Americans that were captured during CIDG operations were Lieutenant James Rowe, Captain Humbert Versace, and Sergeant Daniel Pitzer. Captain Versace was eventually murdered after numerous rounds of interrogations and torture. Lieutenant Rowe eventually escaped after five years in captivity.

¹⁶⁷Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 55-56.

The result was Special Forces Command taking the initiative to develop its own QRF rather than relying on conventional forces. The initial concept of Mobile Strike Force units is outlined by Colonel Charles Simpson, deputy commander of 5th Group:

The concept of these forces was that these units could be used as mobile forces for any number of purposes—to reinforce a threatened camp, to patrol areas not covered by camp strike forces or other units, to run special missions in remote areas, and of course, to bail out other camps when in trouble.¹⁶⁸

The Commander of 5th Special Forces Group, Colonel Francis Kelly, established the first formation of MIKE Forces to combat the risk of camps being overrun. Over the course of 1965 and 1966, each C detachment (equivalent to a battalion command and control force of Special Forces companies) would raise a MSF responsible for mobile strike operations in support of their A and B detachments. The initial recruitment pool of the MIKE Forces came from the Nungs¹⁶⁹ formed in Danang in 1965.¹⁷⁰

Mobile Strike Force Command and Control (USSF and CIDG)

Unlike the CIDG camps, in which LLDB forces ultimately commanded while US Special Forces only advised and resourced, the Mobile Strike Forces were led at every level (platoon, company, battalion and force) by US Special Forces or members of the Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam (AATTV). The C team leader would ultimately command at the force level (with the deputy commander of 5th Group leading the group MSF). Senior captains or majors would command the battalions across the

¹⁶⁸Charles Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 121-123.

¹⁶⁹The Nungs were known for their exceptional fighting and professionalism under the French during the First Indochina War.

¹⁷⁰Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 123-125.

Mobile Strike Force. A captain or senior NCO would lead the companies, with lieutenants and NCOs leading the platoons.¹⁷¹

One example of the command and control by US Special Forces is A Team 503, which led a MSF battalion in 1967. The team had four officers and 20 NCOs. The officers would serve as battalion commanders and staff, with the senior NCOs (master sergeants) serving as company commanders. The remaining NCOs would be platoon leaders and additional battalion-level staff.¹⁷²

The MSFs themselves were formed using the basis of an infantry battalion, although most were adjusted to fit the specific mission requirement. A force would be made up of 3-5 battalions, with three companies in each battalion (with an additional recon company). Each company would have three platoons, with each platoon having a weapon's squad. Each company also had a weapons platoon and recon platoon that was subordinate to the company commander.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970*, 30.

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 30-35.

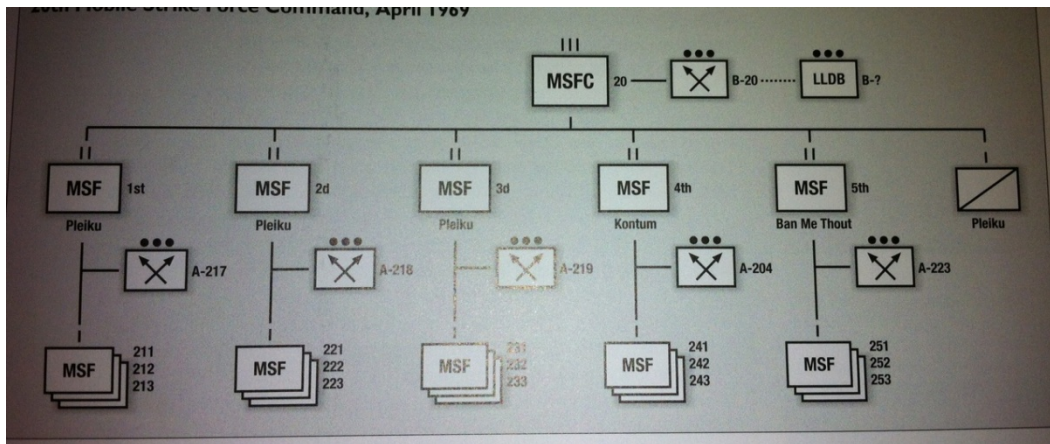


Figure 8. Mobile Strike Force command tructure–force level
Source: Gordon Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey, 2007), 33.

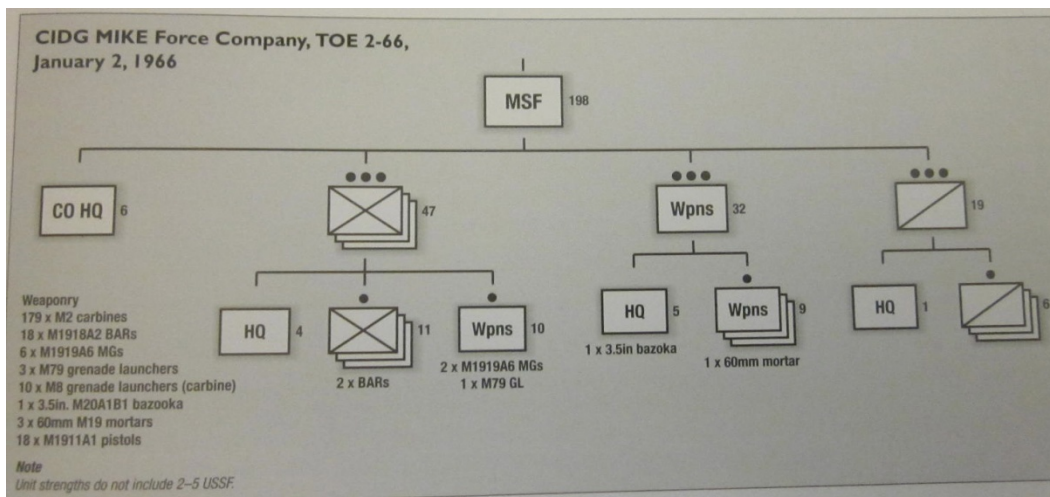


Figure 9. Mobile Strike Force Company command structure
Source: Gordon Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey, 2007), 37.

Mobile Strike Forces Role within the CIDG

The Mobile Strike Forces mission would be described as “a multi-purpose reaction force located in each of the four Corp areas, and an additional unit located at Nha Trang.” Its core missions were to:

1. Constitute a C-team reserve
2. Conduct raids, ambushes, and combat patrols.
3. Be prepared to reinforce CIDG camps under attack.
4. Conduct search and secure operations.
5. Conduct small-scale conventional operations.¹⁷⁴

Colonel Kelly developed his own MIKE Force that would be under the command and control of the 5th Special Forces Group, commanded personally by the deputy commanding officer. Colonel Kelly was quoted by his deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Simpson III as stating, “While I am the Group Commander, none of my camps will be taken by the enemy. If one of my camps appears threatened, be it day or night, the Nha Trang MIKE Force will be parachuted into that camp to prevent the defeat, and you will lead them.”¹⁷⁵

LTC Simpson personally led the initial development of the Mobile Strike Forces, ensuring that all MSFs under the command of 5th Group met the training standards and combat effectiveness of 5th Group’s primary strike force. Mobile Strike Forces across 5th Special Forces Group conducted various raids, ambushes and missions that conventional forces were not willing to perform. Primary concerns of US conventional forces were

¹⁷⁴Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970*, 10.

¹⁷⁵Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 125.

artillery coverage and large formations, which normally would prevent the Viet Cong from making any contact. However, MSFs were willing to operate in smaller, lighter patrols without artillery cover that would allow for long duration operations that would increase enemy contact and development of intelligence.¹⁷⁶

Mobile Strike Forces in Action

Mobile Strike Forces conducted several limited missions. *Operation Robin Hood* was one such mission by the I Corps MIKE Force from 6-13 December 1968. The purpose of the mission was to clear the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in and around the city of Quang Ngai. Three MSF companies participated in the mission with two companies blocking and a third raiding. The two companies blocking denied the northwest avenue of retreat while the third swept through the valley. Despite numerous sniper and harassing attacks from the NVA, the MSF companies pressed on. When all was said and done, the NVA and Viet Cong were able to slip through the blocking companies, but damage was done. The MSF claimed a body count of six NVA killed, one captured and over 3000 lbs of rice destroyed.¹⁷⁷

Another MIKE Force mission, conducted by 5th Group's MSF, involved taking the mountains in IV Corps' area of operation. Since July of 1968, free world units had attempted to capture the Nui Coto Mountain along the Vietnamese/Cambodian border. The peak of Nui Coto had been dubbed "million dollar hill" because of all the ordinance hidden in the tunnels of the mountain. This mission was conducted in three phases. In the

¹⁷⁶Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets*, 133.

¹⁷⁷Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam*, 71-72.

first phase, CIDG forces from IV Corps MSF would conduct a cordon of the mountain, along with psychological operations in an attempt to have some VC to surrender (nine did). Phase II would cut off known avenues of retreat and supply lines, once again by forces from IV Corps MSF. The third phase would consist of 5th Groups MSF conducting the assault on the mountain on 17 March 1969. One battalion made a sweep towards the top of the mountain with two battalions sweeping the lower part of the mountain. MSF soldiers experienced heavy casualties but continued to fight on. After 14 days of fighting, the VC gave up the position. The two MSFs lost 45 dead and 191 wounded. They accounted for 53 VC dead and 23 captured. Additionally the MSF captured over 500 small arms, 13 crew-served weapons, large quantities of ammunition, and numerous enemy documents.¹⁷⁸

The significance of these missions was the change from a reaction forces for CIDG camps to Viet Cong hunting expeditions. While the MSF were successful in these offensive missions, it only gave more precedence to use them in this role. This would ultimately take the CIDG mission officially away from a defensive population control measure to a conventionalized task orientation, essentially becoming additional infantry battalions available for combat operations.

Mobile Guerrilla Force

The Mobile Guerilla Force was another project under 5th Special Forces Group that tied in with the CIDG and Mobile Strike Force programs. The program was started in late 1966 following the initial success of the Mobile Strike Forces. As opposed to the

¹⁷⁸Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam*, 80-88.

MIKE Forces, with their mission as reaction forces, or planned patrols, these units would set out to conduct reconnaissance to confirm enemy positions, routes, bases and activities. They would conduct ambushes and raids on the Viet Cong bases they were able to locate. They also had control of the entire area they were operating in, to include close air support.¹⁷⁹

Since the genesis of the Mobile Guerilla Force was born out of the MIKE Forces, many similarities existed, particularly since US Special Forces trained both. However there were key characteristics that distinguished the two organizations. Colonel Kelly describes the differences in the following way:

The mobile guerrilla force unit was organized without a weapons platoon, but [with] an M-60 machine gun in the company headquarters. The combat reconnaissance platoon could be employed in advance of the mobile guerrilla force to provide reconnaissance, establish an initial resupply point, and gather intelligence. The combat reconnaissance platoon secured the patrol base and received the first resupply pending the arrival of the rest of the force.¹⁸⁰

Ultimately, the Mobile Guerilla Forces would not survive, elements were either absorbed back into MSFs (less than a year after being established), or converted to MAC-V SOG.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces Vietnam 1966-1970*, 14-15.

¹⁸⁰Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam*, 135.

¹⁸¹SOG stands for Studies and Observations Group. It was a highly classified unit which conducted unconventional warfare during the Vietnam War. The unit conducted operations in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. For more on the SOG, see Dale Andrade's *Trial By Fire* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995).

Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam (AATTV)

There is rare mention of the valorous efforts of the Australians comprising of the Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam (AATTV) in working with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).¹⁸² However, by 1965, the AATTV had up to 88 Australians deployed with US Special Forces across the country, working with the CIDG and in particular, the Mobile Strike Forces (MIKE Forces or MSF). Many held command positions within the MSF itself.¹⁸³ The AATTV arrived in Vietnam during the summer of 1962, with restrictions initially placed on them for training purposes only, so the relationship with US Special Forces as advisors to the CIDG was a good fit for the Australians. This role would change once the MSF forces stood up.¹⁸⁴

The most significant contribution the AATTV made was within the Mobile Strike Forces. The AATTV worked in both I and II Corps Mobile Strike Force Groups, holding positions ranging from platoon leader all the way up to battalion commander throughout the conflict. Even more significantly, these Australians had US Special Forces working under their command. In essence, the AATTV was given the same status as US Special Forces within the Mobile Strike Force program.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸²Gordon Rottman briefly mentions the AATTV work with the MIKE Forces of Vietnam in his book *Mobile Strike Force Vietnam 1976-70*. Outside of that, the author of this work found no mention of the AATTV in any other American historical records of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group and US Special Forces.

¹⁸³Bruce Davies, *The Battle of Ngok Tavak* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2008), 17.

¹⁸⁴Ian McNeill, *The Team* (London: Secker and Warburg Limited, 1984), 3. Not all AATTV advisors worked with US Special Forces. Many served as ARVN advisors as well.

¹⁸⁵McNeill, *The Team*, 343.

One of the most notable and controversial instances of AATTV/USSF operations was that of the 11th Strike Force Company of I Corp in early 1968, led by Captain John White at Ngok Tavak.¹⁸⁶ 11th Strike Force Company was tasked with establishing a Forward Operating Base (FOB) just south of Kham Duc. Ngok Tavak was a former French outpost, but for 11th Company it was to be a covert outpost in support of the CIDG camp in Kham Duc. Captain White was hesitant to establish a FOB in support of the CIDG camp, given that the MIKE Force he commanded was supposed to be “a mobile, irregular unit whose safety laid in having a low profile, not fighting pitched battles.”¹⁸⁷

In late April White was given a platoon of Marine 105mm howitzers. The Marines were a welcome fighting force, but the presence of their artillery only tied the 11th Company further to Ngok Tavak. There was no way US forces would allow the fort to be abandoned on short notice without evacuating the howitzers. Additionally, due to the overgrowth of the trees around the abandoned French fort, the howitzers would only be able to fire at high angle artillery, severely limiting the effectiveness of the weaponry. White soon realized he was committed to a purely defensive posture, in a fight he could

¹⁸⁶Bruce Davies and Gary McKay, *The Men who Preserved* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2005), 123. The battle of Ngok Tavak was more notable for the Australians than it was for Americans, given the significant amount of activity experienced by the US I Corp during the May of 1968 (Davies, 119). It was memorable for the Australians in that it resulted in pulling all AATTV advisors out of I Corp area of responsibility (AOR) and sent to II Corp (AOR) for the remainder of the Vietnam Conflict.

¹⁸⁷Bruce Davies, *The Battle at Ngok Tavak* (Crow’s Nest NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2008), 19, 31, 57.

not win, if the NVA chose to mass on his position. White believed he was only using the camp to run offensive missions out of, not defend against an NVA regiment.¹⁸⁸

With multiple North Vietnamese Army (NVA) contacts leading up to 10 May 1968, White realized he was facing upwards of an enemy battalion on his barely defensible outpost. White requested extraction but was denied by the American Special Forces C Team in charge of the I Corp MIKE Force.¹⁸⁹ The outpost was determined key terrain by US Special Forces commanders and an additional CIDG platoon from Kham Duc was sent as reinforcements. The platoon however was infiltrated with VC, as evidenced by cut claymore and telephone lines on their side of the perimeter just prior to the battle beginning.¹⁹⁰

The battle began early the morning of 10 May. VC pretending to be CIDG penetrated the wire of the compound and immediately targeted the howitzers and their crews with flame throwers. The breach allowed two companies of NVA into the compound. The camp began receiving fire from all directions resulting in numerous casualties of CIDG, MIKE Force soldiers, US Marines, and US Special Forces.¹⁹¹

US Special Forces sent in a reaction force to reinforce the 11th Company with 12th Company. The first two helicopters made it into the landing zone (LZ) with only

¹⁸⁸McNeill, *The Team*, 330.

¹⁸⁹Davies, *The Battle at Ngok Tavak*, 42-43.

¹⁹⁰McNeill, *The Team*, 332-333.

¹⁹¹AATTV AAR, May 1968, Annex C, 6. Retrieved from South Asian East Asian Diaries—Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. According to Captain Whites report, over 50 percent of friendly forces were either killed in action, wounded in action, or missing in action.

small arms fire; the second two helicopters were shot down, effectively leaving the LZ unusable for an extraction. At this point, Captain White decided to get the survivors out of Ngok Tavak and to an LZ that would support extraction.¹⁹² Despite the valorous evacuation led by White, ten dead US Marines were left behind along with one US Special Forces medic.¹⁹³ White later wrote of this battle: “An ill-trained force which normally operated in a mobile role was forced to adopt a defensive stand against a well-disciplined enemy in defence of a piece of ground of no value to us. We did cause the enemy to concentrate thus giving target to our sophisticated air power but we paid a heavy price for it.”¹⁹⁴

The result of this battle led to “bad blood” on both sides. Colonel Ladd, the 5th Special Forces Group commander, believed the camp could have been held if White would have waited for reinforcements.¹⁹⁵ The MIKE Force personnel and Vietnamese Special Forces claimed White mistreated them. The Special Forces battalion commander, LTC Schungel, backed the Vietnamese instead of Captain White, further damaging relations between the AATTV and I Corp Special Forces.¹⁹⁶ As a result of this battle, and the way it was handled by US Special Forces in the aftermath, the AATTV commander made the decision to move all additional AATTV personnel to II Corp’s AOR.¹⁹⁷ Colonel

¹⁹²AATTV AAR, May 1968, Annex C, 5.

¹⁹³Davies, *The Battle at Ngok Tavak*, 98.

¹⁹⁴McNeill, *The Team*, 336.

¹⁹⁵Davies, *The Battle at Ngok Tavak*, 108.

¹⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁹⁷McNeill, *The Team*, 337.

Ladd also made the decision that the commanding officer would always be an American Special Forces soldier.¹⁹⁸

The AATTV served with US Special Forces in II Corp's AOR until the US Special Forces began leaving Vietnam. They continued serving in commanding roles at the company and platoon levels. They participated in the American "Vietnamization" by assisting South Vietnamese Special Forces in taking command of the MIKE Forces and ultimately turning all CIDG troops into ARVN units. The AATTV and US Special Forces relationship ultimately ended on 26 August 1970.¹⁹⁹

Conventionalization of the CIDG

The offensive nature of the MIKE Forces and the Mobile Guerilla Forces had substantial impacts on the ability to kill the enemy. However, at this point, the dramatic shift can be seen between the initial defensive (and highly successful) nature of the CIDG and the offensive tactics of the MSF. The MSFs were essentially becoming additional conventional units. This shift, whether it was acknowledged or not, was the US Special Forces along with their irregular forces, were being turned into another conventional battalion, moving away from the initial mission of population control. Since USSF allowed this to happen (by aggressively establishing MSFs), they hold some responsibility for the MSF becoming additional battalions in the order of battle.

While the MSFs were effective, their effectiveness lay in their ability to be mobile, quick, and elusive. They were not trained for large-scale sweeping operations or

¹⁹⁸Davies, *The Battle at Ngok Tavak*, 110.

¹⁹⁹McNeill, *The Team*, 338-374.

cordon and searches. The CIDG Program, which had made exceptional progress through village defense, would fall by the wayside, as seen in the subsequent transition to South Vietnamese control.²⁰⁰

Transition of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group to Vietnamese Control

The primary mission for United States Special Forces in 1968 to 1970 was to turnover the CIDG program to the South Vietnamese Special Forces. This was part of “Vietnamization,” the American strategy in the latter half of the 1960s and into the 1970s. This strategy transferred the military and governmental responsibilities to the RVN, to include small, but extremely effective projects such as the CIDG program.²⁰¹

The CIDG program in the Vietnam War is generally considered a successful counterinsurgency effort, particularly during the early stages when it was population focused. According to Gordan Rottman (who served with the CIDG during the Vietnam War), some of the limitations of the MIKE Forces can be summarized as follows: lightly armed and equipped, limited tactical mobility, limited level of individual and unit training, limited logistical capabilities, disenfranchised ethnic minorities with their own political agenda, lack of a military judicial system, able to resign when desired, and marginal levels of military discipline. These problems became more evident when the LLDB began to take over the MSFs during Vietnamization. Rottman argues that

²⁰⁰Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 48-49.

²⁰¹Eric Bergerug, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Haw Nghia Province* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1986), 223-254.

potentially the program would have continued to be effective if leadership had been raised from within the organization rather than being turned over to the LLDB.²⁰²

As the conventional forces of the United States pushed harder and harder for conventional South Vietnamese units to take on border security missions resulted in the CIDG forces being overtaken and transitioned into regular army units. By 1970, there were only 37 remaining CIDG groups on the border, all turned into Vietnamese Ranger battalions. With the remainder of Special Forces advisors gone from CIDG camps, the US Special Forces mission ended officially on 31 December 1970. While this was the official end of the CIDG mission in South Vietnam, B and C detachments stayed behind for quite some time to continue to assist remaining CIDG elements that were conducting operations into Cambodia.²⁰³

Conclusion

United States' Special Forces had been operating in Vietnam since the late 1950s well before conventional forces came into the conflict. Their initial success came in the form of effective population control measures through the Civilian Irregular Defense Group. Their vision of the CIDG program changed as the war did, from primarily a defensive measure designed to enable local nationals, to an offensive force to support the overall theater mission. US Special Forces discovered initiative in programs and missions outside the scope of failure. Ultimately, despite the many shortcomings, the CIDG program executed by US Special Forces was a successful counterinsurgency program,

²⁰²Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam*, 91-92.

²⁰³Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, 156-158.

particularly effective in controlling the population the South Vietnamese nor US general purpose forces were unable (or unwilling) to affect.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The use of irregular forces for population control has influenced numerous counterinsurgency campaigns in the 20th century. Virtually all counterinsurgency campaigns have enlisted the assistance of locally-raised security forces to augment and in some cases, replace regular army units. The Vietnam War was no different. US Special Forces (USSF) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established the Civilian Irregular Group (CIDG) to meet the challenges of controlling population outside the control of the South Vietnamese government in the highlands of South Vietnam.

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group was a new concept for the United States. What started as a small experiment by the CIA, expanded into a massive counterinsurgency project led by US Special Forces in Vietnam. Through USSF's deep understanding of the Montagnard tribes, in particular their tribal culture, they were able to develop formidable local security forces capable of protecting most the Montagnard population. The CIDG was a successful counterinsurgency tool through 1965 while it remained defensively focused. The Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MAC-V) decided to transition the CIDG program to this offensive role as the US took a greater role in ground combat. While the MSFs initially were designed to provide a quick reaction force to the CIDG camps, the mission quickly expanded essentially turning them into additional conventional forces for use by the MAC-V.

Theorists

The various historical theorists studied in this paper agreed on the need for population control and the raising of local forces to accomplish the task. In Algiers, Robert Trinquier advocated for sector forces to control the population in “districts.” David Galula referred to these local security forces simply as “static forces.” Robert Thompson advocated the use of locally raised forces in both “New Villages” in Malaya and the “Strategic Hamlet Program” in Vietnam. Governments in Oman and Rhodesia would also rely on the use of locally raised forces to control the population during insurgencies.²⁰⁴ The common theme seen throughout the historical literature is that local security forces used in a defensive manner is essential in controlling the population and ultimately being successful as a counterinsurgent.

Vietnam

In addition to the CIDG program, the South Vietnamese made attempts at securing the lowlands of Vietnam through the use of the Strategic Hamlet program. The Strategic Hamlet Program had three priorities according to Thompson. The first was controlling and protecting the population. The second was to win support of the population towards the Republic of Vietnam. Finally, it was to provide basic essential services once the hamlet was secured. Diem initially relied on various militias for population control. When the militias were unsuccessful at securing the villages, Diem moved in regular army forces, which were not adequately trained in counterinsurgency.

²⁰⁴For more on the locally raised ‘Firqa’ in Oman, see Tony Jeapes’ Book, *SAS Secret War*. For more on the locally raised ‘Home Guard’ in Rhodesia, see J. K Cilliers’ book, *Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia*.

Ultimately this made the situation in the hamlets worse as the army was more heavy-handed than the militias. The program ultimately died along with Diem.

Thompson states there were several reasons for the Strategic Hamlet Program's demise. One of the primary reasons the program was unsuccessful speed at which these hamlets were established. In Malaya, villages were built sequentially, allowing for irregular forces to reinforce each other in the event of an attack. This left villages as soft targets for the Viet Cong to attack or infiltrate. Another reason for the demise of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the need to relocate villagers off their land. This is one of the more extreme contrasts with the CIDG. The CIDG initially built up their camps around the Montagnard villages as opposed to relocating individuals and families. This of course would change once the CIDG's mission transitioned from a defensive to offensive.

United Special Forces Origins

The training and rising up of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group was not the first time Special Forces or its precursors trained irregulars. During World War II, Jedburgh teams operated behind enemy lines to raise local forces capable of resisting the German occupation forces. Operational Groups provided the baseline of what a Special Forces A Team would eventually look like. More importantly was their ability to do a variety of missions with flexibility. Special Forces groups started with the mission of unconventional warfare behind enemy lines in Europe with 10th Special Forces Group, but soon demonstrated an exceptional ability to conduct an even more diverse range of tasks.

US Special Forces started training in Southeast Asia in the 1950s. They trained personnel in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Their mission was to build capability of host nation Special Forces, such as in Vietnam. The relationships established with the South Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB) would later serve both well as they executed the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program together.

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group was a major contribution to the counterinsurgency campaign conducted during the Vietnam War. It began as an experiment by the CIA as a means to control the Montagnard population centers in the highlands of Vietnam. The initial village of Buon Enao was the test bed and served as a template for the CIDG program. After the program was seen as successful by the US Mission and MAC-V, more Special Forces A Teams began flowing into Vietnam to establish additional CIDG formations throughout the villages in the highlands. The key element to this program was population control within the villages of the South Vietnam highlands within their villages. The program was defensive in nature, thus allowing the Montagnards to protect their own homes and villages. This defensive posture lasted until 1965 with the advent of the Mobile Strike Forces.

The Mobile Strike Forces (MSF) were the brainchild of Colonel Francis Kelly (5th Special Forces Group commander in Vietnam 1965) following instruction from MAC-V to build an offensive capability within the CIDG, outside of village defense. CIDG villages were organized into MSF commands and began conducting offensive operations along the Laos and Cambodian borders. They also served as a quick reaction force for defensively based CIDG camps. Very quickly these forces were viewed by

MAC-V of being additional infantry battalions, and thus moving away from a defensive mindset to a conventionally offensive mindset. These Mobile Strike Forces ultimately became additional conventional infantry battalions.

US Special Forces in Afghanistan

US Special Forces are currently involved in a counterinsurgency program similar to the CIDG in Afghanistan. They are called Village Stability Operations (VSO) with the mission of supporting villages and leaders who have the will to resist Taliban influence. These villages are supported by a Special Forces ODA (A team) that employs a bottom up methodology to stimulate village social structure, similar to the CIDG. The teams do this through assisting in security operations, civil action projects, and supporting local governance. When the village defenses are attacked, Special Forces use their enablers such as close air support or artillery to help fend off attacks. In July of 2010, these village stability operations were official dubbed “Afghan Local Police” (ALP) and received national recognition from President Hamid Karzai.²⁰⁵

The initial success of this program seems to mirror that of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group prior to the inception of Mobile Strike Forces. US Special Forces and theater commanders in Afghanistan would do well to look at the lessons of the CIDG program to ensure the program maintains its initial defensive mission. Otherwise, the program is likely to go down the same track the CIDG did in becoming an offensive weapon, thereby losing the effectiveness of local population control.

²⁰⁵Brian Petit, “The Fight for the Village,” *Military Review* (May-June 2011): 25-32. See this article for more on the ALP/VSO mission.

Summary

Was the Civilian Irregular Defense Group a successful counterinsurgency tool? Initially yes, when the program was defensively-minded. Montagnards defending their own land and not being uprooted (as in the Strategic Hamlet Program) was a key component to making the program initially successful. However, the change of strategy to raise the Mobile Strike Forces destroyed the viability and effectiveness of the CIDG. As an offensively focused mission, the program degraded and eventually became more combat power for the MAC-V command. Also contributing to the degradation of the program was the ineffectiveness of the LLDB in commanding the camps, especially after US Special Forces left. While US Special Forces and LLDB worked well together, without the advisory mission by Americans, the camps lost their effectiveness. Had the program remained defensive in nature, rather than the offensive focus post-1965, it may have had a different and more effective result.

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