

**“A FAR MORE FORMIDABLE TASK”:  
THE 101<sup>st</sup> AIRBORNE DIVISION’S PACIFICATION OF THUA THIEN  
PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM 1968-1972**

A Thesis

by

EDWIN BROOKS WERKHEISER II

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2006

Major Subject: History

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## ABSTRACT

“A Far More Formidable Task”:

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s Pacification of Thua Thien Province,  
Republic of Vietnam, 1968-1972. (August 2006)

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This thesis seeks to identify, describe, and analyze the tactics used by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in the pacification of the Republic of Vietnam’s Thua Thien province from 1968 to 1972. Despite the larger calamity of the Vietnam War, the 101<sup>st</sup> developed an effective set of measures against the Vietnamese communist insurgency. These measures depended largely on the ability of the division’s lower-level units to attack the Viet Cong political infrastructure, provide security for Thua Thien’s population, and build effective South Vietnamese territorial forces in their areas of operation following the communist 1968 Tet offensive.

These findings are based on the official reports, orders, and records generated by the division during its service in Vietnam and currently stored in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland and U.S. Army’s Military History Institute in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Additionally, the Military History Institute’s “Company Command in Vietnam” series of interviews conducted from 1982 to 1984 with officers who served in Vietnam provided valuable insight. This thesis looks at counterinsurgency practices at the lowest levels where theory and policy are translated into action.

Operations Narrative: 3 September 1970. “At 0525 hours D Company, 3d Platoon had two frag grenades tossed into its night defensive position. A member of the platoon threw one of the grenades out of the position before it exploded. He jumped on the other grenade and covered it with his body. The grenade did not explode due to the fact that the safety had not been removed.”<sup>1</sup>

I was inspired to undertake and complete this study by the courageous and fortunate soldier in 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon, D Company, 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the thousands of others like him whose exploits I found in the footnotes of the Vietnam War. Their stories were resting uneasily as antiseptic fragments in a hundred reports, giving single-sentence snapshots of their part in a war many more clever people declared lost just as they began their fight in 1968. Their names are forgotten to time and their efforts largely relegated to obscurity by others who occupied a larger, grenade-free stage at much less personal risk. Still, they are the men we all want alongside us in our night defensive position. Their deeds are much easier to comment on than they were to perform.

1. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Texas Star, dated 20 September 1970,” p. 5, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, Record Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD.

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**CHAPTER I**  
**INTRODUCTION AND ORIGINS OF U.S. ARMY PACIFICATION**  
**OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM:**  
**“USING A STEAMROLLER TO CRUSH AN EGG IN THE DARK”**

During the Vietnam War, the United States and South Vietnamese campaigns to increase the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government with its own people and defeat the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong insurgency became known as *pacification*. Pacification existed as a concept and practice throughout the conflict, and by 1968 a U.S. Army handbook on the subject gave a formal definition:

...the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy’s underground government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion... The key to pacification is the provision of sustained territorial security.<sup>2</sup>

Although pacification programs, agencies, and objectives existed from the introduction of American forces in the advisory period in 1962, pacification only became the primary focus of the U.S. effort in Vietnam in 1968 as a result of changed battlefield dynamics in Vietnam and political dynamics in the United States.

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This thesis follows the style of the *Journal of Military History*.

2. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1968), 2, Box 186, Organizational History Files, Military Historian’s Office, Records of HQ, U.S. Army, Pacific, Record Group (RG) 550, National Archives II, College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as NARA II).



As the last U.S. division to fully deploy to Vietnam, the final two infantry brigades and headquarters of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division arrived in country during December 1967. Initially operating in the III Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) immediately north of Saigon, the 101<sup>st</sup> rushed north to Thua Thien province and the city of Hue in the I CTZ when the surprise North Vietnamese (NVA)/Viet Cong (VC) Tet Offensive of late January 1968 nearly overwhelmed U.S. Marine, U.S. Army, and Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces operating there.

During the next four years, until the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne departed Vietnam in February 1972, the infantry battalions of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne constituted the primary U.S. combat force in Thua Thien province. Along with U.S. Advisory Team 18, a collection of South Vietnamese Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF), and the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, the 101<sup>st</sup> waged a complex counterinsurgency campaign against regular NVA battalions, smaller NVA and VC guerrilla bands, terror squads preying on the populace, and the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) itself that operated as a shadow government challenging the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) government for legitimacy.

This thesis seeks to identify, describe, and analyze the tactics used by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in Vietnam as an example of how U.S. Army units fought the insurgency. While discussing these operations, mostly conducted by infantry units, I will confront the view that U.S. forces were always preoccupied with either pursuing main force NVA and VC battalions or applying firepower with little sensitivity to counterinsurgency and pacification. I believe that U.S. Army pacification tactics as finally executed by the 101<sup>st</sup> Division from mid-1968 to 1972 proved successful in defeating the insurgency in the lowlands and thus merit further study despite the larger calamity of the Vietnam War.

Much of the scholarly attention devoted to the Vietnam War focuses on the national strategic and military policy levels, leaving the description of the tactical level mostly in the hands of autobiographical accounts and a mountain of unpublished official materials. The period following the war produced many accounts, often by authors who

were middle-level civilian or military officials during the war, that criticized the U.S. approach to the war as relying too heavily on attrition, firepower, technology, and large unit operations. These advocates contend that a different U.S. military strategy in Vietnam, centered on gaining the support of the South Vietnamese population rather than the pursuit of North Vietnamese combat formations, would have produced victory (or at least a more economical defeat) than the attrition strategy chosen by General William Westmoreland. In these accounts, the ineffective and corrupt South Vietnamese government often (though not always) contributed to inflexible U.S. military and civilian leadership in explaining the U.S. defeat.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, many U.S. officers who remained with the army after the Vietnam War ended could not understand how they lost a war in which the units under their command won almost every battle in the traditional terms of casualty ratios and ground taken. With first-hand recollection of battlefield success, these officers looked elsewhere to explain the U.S. defeat. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* by retired army Colonel Harry Summers formed a break with the existing historiography by asserting that the U.S. strategy wasted energy on pacification. Summers and other officers also blamed what they thought were irrational political restrictions that restrained the military from defeating the external threat from North Vietnam that ultimately conquered South Vietnam.<sup>4</sup>

At the tactical level, the U.S. Army and Defense Department produced numerous studies of the war in Vietnam during the conflict. Most works by army officers were written after first-hand experience in Vietnam either for professional journals, or papers written while at the Army War College. These articles and unpublished materials form

3. Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985). See also Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

4. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984). See also Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), and Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S. – Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), and Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946 – 1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988).

an element of the army's institutional memory readily discarded by most of the officer corps in the post-Vietnam era. One of the intents of this study will be to bring these accounts from the 101<sup>st</sup> Division to light and integrate them into the actual conduct of pacification in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

Defense Department studies have similar value, though they largely use the analytical and quantitative tools favored in the department's bureaucracy of the times. In this genre, the RAND Corporation published dozens of studies in an attempt to define and quantify the insurgency for decision-makers in the Pentagon. The operations research techniques and quantification often used in these case studies are now standard fodder for many of the Vietnam War's critics and participants alike for painting a false picture of the war and ignoring the moral factors of combat. A second look, however, reveals meticulous data gathering, lucid arguments, and a good description of the Viet Cong and NVA through prisoner interrogations and data analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Some valuable works have taken a more nuanced approach at analyzing the Vietnam War by looking at a province and unit at war. Eric Bergerud's *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* and *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* both focus on the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and Hau Nghia Province from 1965 to 1970. Kevin M. Boylan's dissertation "The Red Queen's Race: The 173d Airborne Brigade and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province," is similar to Bergerud's works in that Boyland analyzes a single unit in a single province that fought mostly in the lowlands against the Viet Cong. Area studies such as these integrate the actions of the various military, civilian, and Vietnamese actors that fought the war. Their narrow territorial scope also allows both authors to gauge the

5. Jim I. Hunt, "Pacification of Thua Thien Province," *U.S. Army War College Case Study*, 9 March 1970, Folder 19, Box 141, Center for Military History Refiles, Records of the U.S. Army Staff, RG 319, NARAIL. See also Louis D. Swenson, "The Revolutionary Development Program," *Infantry Magazine* 58 (January-February 1968): 28-31.

6. Robert M. Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1969). See also Robert W. Komer, *Impact of Pacification on Insurgency in South Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1970).

effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the pacification effort.<sup>7</sup> This study will do the same for the famed 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during its time in Thua Thien province from 1968-72.

**“Our previous methods of operation”:**

**U.S. Army Pacification Techniques before Tet, 1968**

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), initiated by the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) on 1 November 1968 ultimately shifted U.S. military strategy in Vietnam from a strategy of attrition based on seeking out enemy combat formations to one of Pacification aimed at population security. For the previous four years, from the introduction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division into Vietnam’s Central Highlands in the summer of 1965 until the defeat of the communists’ final “mini Tet” offensive in June 1968, army tactical operations primarily aimed at finding and destroying NVA and VC units.<sup>8</sup> During this period, MACV strategy under General William Westmoreland did not altogether ignore pacification, but relegated it to secondary status behind “the destruction or neutralization of the enemy main forces and

7. Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); and Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: the World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993). See also Kevin M. Boyland, “The Red Queen’s Race: The 173d Airborne Brigade and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province, 1969-1970” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1994).

8. Hq., 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, “Operational Report – Lessons Learned (ORLL), period ending 31 Jul 68,” Box 2, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Files, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) Command Historian’s Files, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA (hereafter referred to as MHI). The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division ORLL lists three separate enemy phases of the Tet offensive based on captured documents and interrogation reports: A “1st Phase Offensive” from 31 Jan-13 Feb 68, a “Second Phase Offensive” from 2-15 May 68, and a “3<sup>rd</sup> Phase Offensive” which was supposed to occur in late July or early August 1968, but never materialized. See also Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “ORLL, period ending 31 Jul 68” and “ORLL, period ending 31 Oct 68,” Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Files, MACV Command Historian’s Files, MHI, for a similar characterization of fighting in I Corps near Hue.

bases” and left its execution to the ARVN and U.S. civilian agencies.<sup>9</sup> Still, as will be addressed, during this period pacification and other counterinsurgency tactics were attempted in a limited number of operations in the field. Although these pacification operations remained a sideshow to the quest for a higher kill ratio and the destruction of main force units, their continued development laid the foundation for what would become institutionalized counterinsurgency practices used later by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division.

The overwhelming majority of U.S. tactical actions during the 1965-68 period of the war were conducted with the intent of searching for enemy units, fixing or encircling them when possible, and using firepower to destroy them. These operations were lavish in the expenditure of ordnance and usually found sizable enemy formations only if the enemy decided to stand and fight. The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s Operations Greenleaf and Portsea conducted in February and April 1967 serve as examples for the types of missions and results achieved during this period.

Operation Portsea contains examples of many mistakes made during U.S. combat operations conducted before Tet 1968. The expenditure of resources and damage inflicted tended to be counterproductive to the results attained. Greenleaf, on the other hand, serves as an example of adhering to the form of counterinsurgency tactics over the actual function of the tactics. These features were common to many population security actions conducted sporadically by American units during this period.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade’s After Action Review for Operation Portsea stated that the brigade’s objective simply was “the destruction of the Viet Cong, his living quarters, fortifications, and the capture, destruction, or evacuation of his supplies.”<sup>10</sup> The brigade’s intelligence section concluded that an area of Phouc Tuy province was a major

9. William Westmoreland, “Westmoreland’s 18 March 1967 Memo on Increase in Forces,” in *The Pentagon Papers; The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. 4, Senator Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-72), 428.

10. Hq., 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report, dated 3 May 1967,” p. 9, Box 40, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Command Historian, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

staging area for the 5<sup>th</sup> VC Division. Reports indicated that fourteen battalion-size base camps and numerous weapons and rice caches may have been located in this part of the province. Additionally, “all villages within the AO [area of operations] were viewed as actively or passively supporting the VC.” The concept for the forthcoming operation was equally direct: “The Brigade was to move into the AO... establish a fire support base, cordon the squatter village, assist in the evacuation of VN families, and destroy the village; and conduct search and destroy operations throughout the AO.”<sup>11</sup>

To this end, the brigade employed a regular infantry battalion, a mechanized infantry battalion, an armored cavalry squadron, an artillery battalion firing over 19,000 rounds in support of operations, and 39 attack aircraft sorties dropping over 100 tons of bombs. Over the next two weeks, the companies of 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade conducted numerous “search and destroy” operations during the day and employed dozens of “squad and platoon sized ambushes” each night.<sup>12</sup> The ambushes made no contact with the VC at night and enemy contact during the day was with his abandoned fortifications or occasionally small squad-sized groups.<sup>13</sup> On 16 April 1967, the two-week operation ended and 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade units left the sector after having killed an estimated 44 VC and captured six more at the cost of five U.S. killed, 58 wounded, and four armored vehicles destroyed. Before the operation, the brigade intelligence estimate listed enemy strength at two to three VC regiments and assorted local force companies. Although the five base camps and tons of supplies destroyed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade were not necessarily easy for the VC to replace, it is likely that replacements for the 50 VC lost by the 5<sup>th</sup> VC Division were now more easily recruited from the 272 Vietnamese forcibly re-settled during the opening stages of this operation.<sup>14</sup> With no U.S. forces remaining in the area, VC forces were free to re-occupy their base camps and wait for the coming Tet holiday in 1968.

11. Ibid. See pages 4-5 for intelligence estimate.

12. Ibid., pp. 2-3. See pages 6-10 for narrative of execution.

13. Ibid., p. 6. The daily log for this action is filled with actions such as this brief encounter: “The battalion [2-39 Infantry] captured two oxcarts and sustained 1 WIA during a brief meeting engagement with 3 VC. Enemy casualties were unknown.” No U.S. unit made contact with any force larger than 12 enemy for the duration of Portsea.

14. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

Operation Greenleaf, mounted by 2-39 Infantry over Tet 1967, serves as an archetype of a well-intentioned population security mission executed to time and not to standard. The battalion cordoned the village of Ap Binh Son in the Mekong Delta region of VI Corps in order to “maintain security of [the village] to thwart VC attempts to resupply and build-up or reposition forces” during the Tet cease-fire of 8-12 February 1967.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Portsea, the 2-39 Infantry during Greenleaf did not need to make any use of its supporting fires as the enemy contact was extremely light.

The battalion made extensive use of civic action and psychological operations assets to provide services for and entertain the villagers. The psychological operations team showed eight movies; the battalion surgeon saw seventy-eight Vietnamese patients and delivered a baby; and the various units of the battalion repaired bridges, culverts, and donated money and food to needy locals. Meanwhile, the infantry companies established a checkpoint on the improved road passing through the village (ostensibly to stop any VC traffic passing through the town), conducted search and destroy operations during the day, and established blocking positions at night. The battalion had two confirmed enemy contacts during this operation, a sighting of a 12-man VC squad that occurred during the Tet cease-fire and an inconclusive exchange of fire with a 5-man VC element. 2-39 Infantry did not suffer or inflict any casualties, captured 116 documents, 100 pounds of rice, and destroyed one tunnel and five foxholes. No South Vietnamese units participated in this operation.<sup>16</sup>

The battalion commander claimed that although the operation “netted little in the way of actual VC, [it] was successful particularly from a civil affairs point of view.” He also observed that the villagers “displayed more confidence in our ability to protect

15. Hq., 2-39 Infantry, “Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Greenleaf, dated 18 February 1967,” Pages not numbered, Section #6: Mission, Box 40, Operational Reports, Lessons Learned, Command Historian, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

16. Ibid., Section #5: Civil Affairs/Psychological Warfare. The titles of the psychological operations team’s movies were listed as “Freedom for Men,” “Night of the Dream,” “None of Your Business,” “Dalat the Resort,” “Go Go Mania,” “What is Disease,” “Dancing to Freedom,” and “Hawaii, USA.” See Section #8: Execution, for details of enemy contact and results of operation.

them” and was particularly glad to see that the village policeman had begun to wear his uniform again after thinking he was now free from VC retribution. The final indicators of 2-39 Infantry’s success were the “children pointed out to us the locations of trip flares and returned two grenades and two hundred sandbags ... [and that] the people were sorry to see us leave.”<sup>17</sup> None of the people were probably more sorry to see the 2-39 Infantry leave than the village policeman, whose fate would now be at the mercy of the VC.

At the end of the operation, the battalion listed several conclusions that the commander thought were particularly applicable to producing success in future population security missions. First, “the Village Chief’s wishes should be adhered to when practical” and “a special effort to make friends with the villagers must be initiated.” Next, the battalion leadership thought that “when conducting operations in populated areas, maximum number of ARVN forces should be available” and that it was important to employ the local population when repairing the area, but equally essential to use village leaders instead of giving things directly to the people. Finally, “it is not good to cater to one religious sect.”<sup>18</sup>

While these conclusions were not necessarily incorrect, the temporary nature of the unit’s presence made them irrelevant. 2-39 Infantry was passing through the village on what became a week-long, low-intensity mission to find the VC and hand out goodies. On the other hand, the VC were in Ap Binh Son to stay and transform the village’s social structure by both coercion and cooperation. Any villager bold enough to assist the Americans could be dealt with after they left.

Both of these operations shared the same fundamental weakness in that they viewed the Vietnamese people as an adjunct to the war that needed to be alternately resettled, screened, avoided, or assisted materially – but only in order to attack the VC. Both operations anticipated finding the VC as a problem whose symptom was an uncooperative, sometimes hostile populace instead of the more realistic circumstance:

17. Ibid., Section #5: Civil Affairs, paragraph d; “Indications of Success.”

18. Ibid., Section #5: Civil Affairs, paragraph c; “Conclusions.”



the VC was part of the same villages that the U.S. forces were alternately destroying or passing through. This serious misconception drove the shallow, almost satirical, application or ignorance of counterinsurgency tactics seen in the extremes of both of these examples.

Greenleaf gives an instance of the ultimately unproductive results of a conciliatory policy towards the insurgency when undertaken without accompanying measures needed to give conciliation a chance of success. To be effective, 2-39 Infantry needed to be able to deliver long-term population security from the VC and social reforms needed to win the population over to the cause of South Vietnam's government. Despite all of the traditional advantages in equipment and numbers that 2-39 Infantry enjoyed over its VC opponent, a U.S. infantry battalion due to change missions and leave the area within a week could not accomplish either.

Portsea, on the other hand, gives a sample of the uselessness of applying firepower and coercion while making little effort to link these measures to intended enemy and civilian behavior. The VC accomplished far more productive results by precisely applying coercion and violence over a prolonged time than all the equipment and several thousand men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade could ever counter in only two weeks of search and destroy operations.

A contrast to these 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division operations is found in an example from the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment to the north in III Corps. This 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division battalion demonstrated a better understanding of the requirements of successful counter-insurgency tactics and a more sophisticated approach to population security. Operation Fresno was a month-long mission mounted from 13 June 1966 to 15 July 1966 in order to restore GVN control to a district of Hau Nghia Province previously under VC control.<sup>19</sup>

19. Hq., 2-27 Infantry, "After Action Report, Operation Fresno," Pages not numbered, Section #9: Mission, Box 11, After Action Reports, Command Historian, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. The mission statement for the controlling headquarters, 2-27 Infantry, read: "2/27 Inf... conducts S & D [Search and Destroy] operations in AO; conducts combat patrols and ambushes; conducts combined

2-27 Infantry of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division began Fresno with “little hard intelligence information on the area,” but devoted extensive efforts during the initial days of the operation to the interrogation of captured VC and interviews with villagers to attempt to determine the enemy’s infrastructure that had established a “shadow government” challenging GVN legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the battalion’s infantry companies saturated the area with day and night patrols that occasionally bumped into small VC units. These patrols scored their most important successes in their psychological impact on the local guerrillas and not in their body counts, as evidenced by a VC squad leader who surrendered to an ARVN battalion on 29 June 1966. Two weeks into the operation, this squad leader claimed that he had grown demoralized by the continuous U.S. and ARVN patrols and feared getting killed. The next day he led a combined U.S./ARVN force to his squad’s hiding place in a neighboring hamlet, resulting in the capture of nine more VC. A similar surrender and exploitation occurred ten days later that led to the capture of three more VC, including the hamlet finance chief.<sup>21</sup>

At the conclusion of Fresno, the 2-27 Infantry’s commander gave some indication of his enthusiasm for conducting future operations of this type in his analysis section of the after action review: “Operation Fresno was this battalion’s first experience with the extended period, area and people oriented mission which emphasized pacification, as differentiated from the previous operations, which were usually search and destroy missions of short durations in continually changing areas. These latter operations virtually were conducted in people and intelligence vacuums.” The battalion commander continued with an important insight: “The key to counterinsurgency operations at battalion or any level is valid tactical intelligence.... Lacking this intelligence and discounting pure blind luck, countless man hours and resources are wasted alternately ‘using a steamroller to crush an egg in the dark’ or

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operations with local ARVN forces; provides ... technical advice ... to RF and PF units; conducts road improvement operations in sector; conducts an extensive CA [Civil Affairs] and Psy/war program in AO.”

20. Ibid., Section #8: Intelligence. The battalion Intelligence section produced five pages reviewing techniques and results from this operation.

21. Ibid.

committing insufficient resources to do the job.” Furthermore, he hoped these results could be duplicated in the future: “This battalion was able to net tangible results – captured Viet Cong with their weapons and equipment, weapons, cadres, documents, etc. This was done with considerably less casualties and expenditures of resources than out previous operations have produced. We are enthusiastic about the technique. It holds greater potential than our previous methods of operations.”<sup>22</sup>

As a general rule, the longer an American conventional unit could operate in one area and develop ties to GVN forces, the more security it provided to the South Vietnamese people. Before the VC offensives of 1968, however, extended population security missions were subordinate to the attrition campaign. American battalions, brigades, and even entire divisions were shifted throughout to pursue and contain conventional communist units. With the sole exception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment’s sixteen-month-long Operation Byrd conducted in coastal area of II Corps from August 1966 to January 1968, no U.S. Army battalion remained in one area for longer than six weeks to conduct a population security mission.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, the organized and massed battalions of the VC and NVA posed an equal, if not greater, threat to the survival of the GVN than did the insurgency. Therefore, the

22. Ibid., Section #15: Commander’s Analysis.

23. Hq., 2-7 Cavalry, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Byrd, dated 10 May 1968,” Box 5, Combat After Action Reports, MACV Command Historian’s Files, MHI. 2-7 Cavalry operated as an independent Task Force of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division with its own attached helicopter, Civil Affairs, Psychological Warfare, and logistics assets. See the following division and separate brigade quarterly Operational Reports – Lessons Learned (ORLLs) for further illustration of subordinate battalion movements within nominally static divisional sectors: 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (May, 1967 – June 1969), 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (November 1967 to June 1969), 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (November 1966 to June 1969), and 199<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade (November 1966 to June 1969). All ORLLs cited above located in United States Army, Vietnam (USRV), Command Historian files, MHI. These were the only army units continuously deployed in the same populated areas before 1969. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions were static, but operated largely in sparsely-populated jungle areas north and west of Saigon. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (which deployed to Vietnam as a separate brigade until joining the rest of the division in December, 1967) and 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade served as theater reserves and often were moved between I, II, and III Corps areas in pursuit of enemy main force units.

attrition strategy's effectiveness relative to a comparable commitment to a population security strategy can never be completely resolved. The attrition strategy was effective, though probably not efficient, in a narrow sense by driving enemy main force units from the battlefield and setting the essential conditions for pacification and population security operations that would follow. On the other hand, the enemy's capability to mount a large-scale surprise attack produced decisive effects on U.S. involvement and the ultimate outcome of the war. Although this question will forever remain unresolved, these three examples give a representative sampling of the types of tactics that army battalions used to attack the Viet Cong insurgents. Following the Tet offensive, units would take this uneven legacy of population security and search and destroy missions to fashion a set of more effective pacification tactics with which to execute the APC and later MACV campaign plans.

#### **“Getting off the treadmill”: Pacification Shares the Spotlight**

The shift of MACV strategy in the APC was the result of three significant changes in Vietnam War fully evident by late 1968. The most visible change to the U.S. effort in the war was a change of commander. On 22 March 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced that Westmoreland would be recalled to become Army Chief of Staff and be replaced by his deputy, General Creighton Abrams, in June of that year.<sup>24</sup> For some historians, this change of command in itself marked a decisive shift in U.S. operational philosophy.<sup>25</sup> While Abrams left a greater record of his belief in the effectiveness of pacification operations than his predecessor, it is unlikely that he could

24. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 248.

25. Lewis Sorely, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999). Sorely's thesis is that Abrams' orders and intentions for fighting the Vietnam War were a decisive break from his predecessor. See also William Colby, with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 213. Colby believed that Abrams' approach to the war was formed in 1967 while serving as Westmoreland's deputy.

have (or would have) pursued the shift in strategy evident in the APC if not for changes on the battlefield in Vietnam and in the U.S. strategy guiding him from Washington.

Despite the casualties incurred by the Viet Cong in mounting the Tet offensive and the failure to achieve the general uprising that was the communists' immediate objective in mounting it, the psychological effects were decisive in the United States. Within two months of the start of Tet on 31 January 1968, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson froze the open-ended U.S. commitment to South Vietnam by capping American troop levels at 549,500 and extended an offer to North Vietnamese officials to enter into negotiated settlement.<sup>26</sup> William Colby, the deputy director forCORDS (Civilian Operations for Revolutionary Development Support), claimed that this move occurred despite the feeling held by many in MACV that the time was finally right to go on the offensive and attack the enemy in the villages.<sup>27</sup> The United States was not yet committed to withdrawal from Vietnam, but for the next year, the selection of a new strategy for prosecuting the Vietnam War would await the outcome of the 1968 presidential election and the end of the Tet offensive.

Although 1968 is often viewed as a year of decision in the Vietnam War, U.S. domestic politics and military operations in the theater really should be characterized as indecisive and more of the same. Change was not immediate or predicated on a single decision or individual, and adopting a new strategy in Vietnam only occurred after muddling through the events of 1968. Domestically, the Democratic party split itself dramatically over the nature of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, with the administration in power often at odds with significant portions of its own party base. At the same time, the Republican challenger, Richard Nixon, offered only vague notions of a "peace with honor."<sup>28</sup> In this environment, American domestic politics often had a more immediate, rather than long-term and indirect impact on U.S. military operations. As Abrams

26. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 248.

27. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 232.

28. Kent J. Sieg, "The 1968 Election and Peace in Vietnam," in *Leadership and Diplomacy in the Vietnam War*, Walter L. Hixson ed. (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 276.

observed, the dissent evident in the Democratic party's Chicago convention "gave the North Vietnamese substantial negotiating material. He's [the North Vietnamese] got 1000 Democrats [out of 2500 delegates] that were at that convention that would have emasculated the position over here. He [Humphrey] is out to be elected. And, in my opinion, this gives them a substantial negotiating position. It isn't the facts here."

Abrams' deputy then summarized the probable effect that the U.S. political environment would likely have on future communist activities: "There's a good possibility that Hanoi is convinced that the United States is really militarily, economically, and psychologically exhausted, and what they really have in mind is dogging along with the war rather than getting into a major offensive."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Abrams and his planners at MACV were in most respects in a strategy gap between January and November 1968. The enemy's increased activity from January to June 1968 certainly gave the battalions in the field plenty of intense fighting, but MACV's previous attrition strategy based on large-unit operations was now either repudiated or completed and the future of U.S. Vietnam policy left completely in doubt until sometime after the November elections. Clearly, the VC and NVA possessed the initiative during these months as U.S. commanders could not launch into pacification operations designed to remedy the insurgent problem that allowed for the Tet attacks until the enemy spent or withdrew their forces committed to the offensive. Indeed, Abrams did not even assign his MACV Long Range Planning Task Group to report on the current situation and determine if a change of strategy was appropriate until 31 August 1968, when enemy strength seemed on the wane. The resulting report was damning of previous U.S. strategy, stating that "all our U.S. combat accomplishments

29. Creighton Abrams, as quoted by Lewis Sorely, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972, transcribed, selected, edited, annotated, and with an introductory essay by Lewis Sorely* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 39-40. In a Weekly Intelligence Update conducted a week later, Abrams observed the direct impact that Vietnam operations were having on U.S. politics and vice versa: "One of the interesting things to me in that- part of the plank was to *abolish* search and destroy operations, but when you think of a serious proposal in the Democratic platform to *prescribe* the *tactics* of the field commander in the battlefield, it's really quite and amazing development." p. 42. Italics in original.

have made no significant, positive difference to the rural Vietnamese ... there is no real security in the countryside.... The Viet Cong thrive in an environment of insecurity,” and reflected a growing realization within the command that the time was now ripe for a change in strategy.<sup>30</sup>

The changed battlefield following Tet had the most immediate impact in the adoption of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. For MACV, the months of tough fighting following the first Tet offensive in January 1968 represented a victory and exposed a much-neglected area at the same time. On the one hand, the surprise attacks brought the shadowy VC units out in the open where they were more often than not decimated by U.S. firepower after the initial shock of the attacks wore off.<sup>31</sup> On the other, the very ability to mount these surprise attacks revealed the blind spot of the attrition strategy pursued for the last four years. During the Tet fighting, Abrams summarized the problem facing MACV: “I think we probably all agree that in the end what they’ve [the GVN] got to get done here is control of their own people, and get them secure. The pacification effort is the ultimate effort which has to be made. But right now I think we have to focus on what he’s got to do with his major formations.”<sup>32</sup>

In I Corps around Hue, enemy formations proved to be determined, often fortifying entire hamlets to resist U.S. attempts to regain control of population centers. By March 1968 the situation in I Corps required shifting the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from III Corps near Saigon north to assist the hard-pressed Marine, ARVN, and army

30. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 254.

31. Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, 104. Thayer lists communist deaths for 1968 as 181,000 – the highest of the war. In contrast, 1967 produced 88,000 deaths and 1969 produced 157,000. See also Sorely, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles*, 110. During the 22 January 1969 Weekly Intelligence Update, the unidentified briefer lists communist casualties as “Tet 1968: Enemy losses 42,000. May 1968: Enemy losses 40,000. August 1968: Enemy losses 26,000.” See also Gerald Lord, “Interview with LTC John C. Speedy,” pp. 47-48, Box 30, Company Command In Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI. Captain Speedy’s company of 1-502 Infantry destroyed a well-entrenched enemy battalion-sized unit during Tet by employing vast quantities of bombs, artillery, and naval gunfire.

32. Abrams, as quoted in *Vietnam Chronicles*, 16. Abrams remarks made at the 6 July 1968 WIEU (Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update).

formations in defeating the enemy battalions now massed throughout the area. Arriving in the I Corps area of operations on 18 March 1968, the 101<sup>st</sup> began on 1 April 1968 what would be another four years of continuous operations in Thua Thien province with Operations Carentan I & II.

Operations Carentan I & II were conducted sequentially with the objectives to “locate and destroy enemy forces, bases, and logistical installations in assigned TAOI [Tactical Area of Operations and Interest] with primary emphasis on those forces and bases which pose the greatest threat on GVN control of important population and economic centers and the security of friendly military installations,” and ran until 17 May 1968.<sup>33</sup> The fighting during these operations was intense and nearly continuous, leaving some officers to remark that it was the most difficult and determined of the war.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, as Abrams acknowledged, the enemy units fighting in Thua Thien’s villages and towns would need to be cleared out before any attempt could be made to defeat the Viet Cong Infrastructure and restore GVN control over the South Vietnamese populace in I Corps.

Operation Nevada Eagle, coming after Carentan I & II, saw the end of large-unit enemy resistance in the populated lowlands of Thua Thien province. On 11 May 1969, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne recorded its last contact with an NVA formation in the lowlands and followed this with a “running battle with fleeing enemy east of Hue” from 30 May to 5 June 1968 that resulted in 800 VC killed and captured.<sup>35</sup> After this action, as the division’s after action review noted, “contacts with and sightings of the enemy in groups

33. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Carentan,” p. 3, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

34. Lord, “Interview with LTC John C. Speedy,” Speedy assessed these two months of fighting as the most difficult he encountered during his two years in Vietnam; service that also included the re-taking of the U.S. embassy in Saigon during January 1968 and the Cambodian invasion in 1970. His infantry company was reduced to an effective strength of 60 men during Carentan due to the effects of continuous combat.

35. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “After Action Report (Offensive Operations 17 May 68 to 28 Feb 1969),” p. 4, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.



of larger than squad size were infrequent.”<sup>36</sup> Although the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> could not have anticipated it at the time, the VC and NVA would not or could not organize in large units to fight amongst the population until their Easter Offensive of 1972. For the remainder of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s service in Thua Thien, contact with enemy main force units would be in their jungle base camp areas and contact with the VC would be against their squads and infrastructure in the villages and hamlets. The pacification of Thua Thein province could now begin.

At the end of Tet 1968, Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) statistics indicated that 47 percent of South Vietnam was under GVN influence, with the remainder either contested or totally under VC control.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, by September 1968, U.S Reconnaissance in Force missions (or RIFs) rarely made contact with sizable enemy formations during their operations. Clearly, these two factors when taken together pointed to a need and opportunity for change of mission for army tactical formations. On one hand, MACV could take some satisfaction in the grievous casualties inflicted upon the VC since January 1968. On the other hand, the fact that nearly half of South Vietnam fell under enemy influence still normally allowed him the freedom to choose when to strike and when to reconstitute. For the next phase of the war, HES ratings would replace kill ratio as the American command’s measure of unit effectiveness. MACV attention turned to population security.

Abrams presented the Accelerated Pacification Campaign to his division commanders at a Weekly Intelligence Update on 20 September 1968. The APC was derived directly from the Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam (PROVN), a study that Abrams’ biographer Lewis Sorely claims the MACV

36. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969, dated 19 April 1969,” p. 11, Box 22, After Action Reports, Command Historian, Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

37. Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, 144. Thayer’s statistics indicate that in December 1968, 47 percent of South Vietnamese hamlets were rated in the “A” or “B” Secure status, 30 percent in the “C” Relatively Secure status, 11 Percent in the “D” and “E” Contested status, and 12 percent in the “VC” or VC Controlled status.

commander was very familiar with from his time in the Pentagon before becoming Westmoreland's deputy.<sup>38</sup> In the strategic guidance vacuum that existed in Washington at the time, the APC was nothing more than a temporary fix designed to counter the possibility of another Tet offensive in 1969. As the CORDS representative at the meeting, John P. Vann, commented, "I do think we are suggesting a basic policy change in country. As you know, we have always vacillated between whether we do the job well, and not have to do it again, or whether we go for a quick fix. Right now, this suggests a quick fix, to some extent."<sup>39</sup>

APC objectives were simply stated, but more difficult to achieve: raise 1000 contested hamlets to relatively secure status by 1 February 1969.<sup>40</sup> This three month crash course in pacification would fill the existing strategy gap nicely by focusing units on preventing another series of surprise attacks that could prove fatal to U.S. objectives in Vietnam while testing out the viability of pacification in the field. At the end of the ACP, the new U.S. presidential administration would also be in place and operational objectives could be shifted based on both the APC's success in the field and whatever new strategic guidance might come from Washington. Despite its potentially temporary nature, however, the ACP was to represent a watershed in U.S. high-level planning in Vietnam.

Although population security now achieved prominence in MACV *planning* with the ACP, units in the field still conducted a large number of RIF *operations* in search of main force units after November 1968. The adoption of a population security-centered strategy did not mean that enemy main force units were viewed as any less of a threat by U.S. commanders, however, and much of the U.S. effort over the next three years would

38. Sorely, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles*, 49. According to Sorely, Abrams must have had previous exposure to the PROVN from his time as Army Vice Chief of Staff before coming to Vietnam.

39. John P. Vann, as quoted in *Vietnam Chronicles*, 50. At the time of this meeting John P. Vann served as Deputy CORDS Commander for II Field Force.

40. William Colby, as quoted in *Vietnam Chronicles*, 105. These were Ambassador Colby's remarks at the 16 January 69 Weekly Intelligence Update briefing. There were a little over 13,000 Hamlets in the HES database.

still be expended in keeping these enemy units from infiltrating into the population centers. As MACV's Deputy Commander, General Andrew Goodpaster, explained, "everything that can be pulled together *and not locked into big operations*, [will be directed] against the local forces, [to] get [them] going against the guerrillas."<sup>41</sup> With a weakened enemy, though, Abrams believed by October 1968 that "the picture's clear enough so that some risks can be run with respects to large units," and directed that significant forces be used against the "guerillas, the infrastructure, the local force, all that stuff" so that the U.S. forces could finally get off the "treadmill" where army forces had been focused on smashing up main force units with firepower, but neglecting the support network that made it all possible.<sup>42</sup>

With the enemy now unable and unwilling to combat the 101<sup>st</sup>'s battalions in the open, the mission for these units in Operation Nevada Eagle shifted from "find, fix, encircle, and destroy NVA/VC forces" to "conduct cordon operations in villages ... to destroy enemy forces and installations and pacify the area of resettlement" over the course of the next five months.<sup>43</sup> It can be argued that the resulting 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division actions would prove to be some of the most innovative and effective U.S. pacification operations of the war.

41. Andrew Goodpaster, as quoted in *Vietnam Chronicles*, 64-65. Goodpaster made these comments made at the 12 October 1968 Weekly Intelligence Update. Italics mine.

42. Creighton Abrams, as quoted in *Vietnam Chronicles*, 64-65. Abrams made these comments at the 12 October 1968 Weekly Intelligence Update.

43. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "After Action Report (Offensive Operations 17 May 68 to 28 Feb 1969)," pp. 5-6.

## CHAPTER II

### “A QUESTIONABLE STATUS OF PACIFICATION”: THUA THIEN, 1968

The I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) included the five northern-most provinces of South Vietnam. The two northernmost provinces, Thua Thien and Quang Tri, created a hundred mile long, sixty mile wide finger of South Vietnamese territory bounded on the east by the South China Sea, to the north by North Vietnam itself, and to the west by the communist sanctuary of Laos. Geographically, Thua Thien consisted of three very diverse regions: rugged western highlands featuring triple canopy jungle and steep 3,000 foot ridges, a heavily-populated coastal lowland strip approximately fifteen miles wide in most places that ran the sixty-mile length of the province, and a narrow rolling piedmont area between the coastal plains and mountains largely unsuitable for rice cultivation. Although the NVA and U.S. forces conducted ceaseless infiltration and reconnaissance in force operations in the western highlands throughout the war, the densely-populated coastal lowlands, where the bulk of the province's 526,000 people lived, attracted communist and therefore American attention.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the rich delta region of the Mekong River in IV CTZ south of Saigon, the sandy coastal lowlands of Thua Thien produced only enough rice to remain self-sufficient in times of peace. Similarly, with the rail connection between North and South Vietnam severed at the DMZ and little other large-scale industry, the “Imperial City” of Hue retained more psychological than economic value for either side.<sup>45</sup> A city

44. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Reports and Analysis Directorate, “HES Information Report; Thua Thien Province Data Print-out, dated 31 August 1970,” data sheets not numbered, Box 373 of 431, Center for Military History Re-files, not filed in a Record Group as of August 2005, NARA II. Population figures from August 1970 HES report. See Appendix A: Thua Thien District Map.

45. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operational Report – Lessons Learned, period ending 30 April 1968, dated 4 September 1968,” pp. 4-5, Box 1, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI.

of 140,000 in 1968, Hue served as a center of “militant Buddhism” and opposition to the Catholicism prevalent in Saigon ruling circles. At times, Republic of Vietnam (GVN) civil and military leaders in this northern province “openly defied central authority in Saigon” and from the communist perspective, this situation offered the promise of loosening the region from Saigon’s control.<sup>46</sup> Also, the population of this northern region ranked only behind Saigon and the Mekong Delta and over the years the VC built a strong underground infrastructure in Thua Thien. Finally the region offered a short supply line from North Vietnam for main force units and the potential that a successful offensive might isolate this exposed province from the rest of South Vietnam.<sup>47</sup>

Following the 1968 Tet offensive, the South Vietnamese authorities exercised tenuous control over large swaths of Thua Thien’s rural districts and communist success seemed a distinct possibility. The careful and persistent building of secure base areas and infrastructure over many years, enabled the communists to achieve such dramatic results with their surprise attacks. As this account will show, the insurgency’s methods capitalized on vulnerabilities in rural South Vietnamese society and deficiencies of Allied remedies to produce “a questionable state of pacification” after the 1968 attacks in Thua Thien province.<sup>48</sup>

46. Hoang Ngoc Lung, *Indochina Monographs: The General Offensives of 1968-69* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 75.

47. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. by Merle L. Pribbenow, foreword by William J. Duiker (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 214-17.

48. Jack Walker, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Huong Tra District Report, dated 28 March 1968,” p. 1, Monthly Province Reports, March to June 1968, Box 14, Monthly Province Reports, Advisory Team 18, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. All province and district reports from the Advisory Team 18 are hereafter referred to by their location and date of report. All Advisory Team 18 reports are located in Box 14 and referred to as Advisory Team 18 Collection.

**“The king’s law bows before village custom”:**

**Village Organization and Communist Exploitation**

The political organization of Thua Thien province in 1968 followed the standard South Vietnamese model of military government. In 1968 the trappings of constitutional governance for South Vietnam remained largely theoretical and its institutions unproven. Before this time the GVN would best be defined by its opposition to communism rather than its stance in favor of any governing principle. The constitutional reform process began to show results only in September 1966 following pressure from U.S. officials and the first national parliamentary elections occurred in October 1967, over two years after the Marines landed at Da Nang.<sup>49</sup> As one South Vietnamese general involved in the pacification campaign remarked after the war, “the U.S. insistence on political stability and elective, democratic government as preconditions to continued aid and support effectively molded the RVN [Republic of Vietnam] regime into a western-style democracy that functioned primarily in form, not in substance.”<sup>50</sup>

With the transformation processes underway for less than two years, even the bland and uncritical *U.S. Army Handbook for Military Support of Pacification* stated in 1968 that “an elected constitutional structure has just come into being.” Furthermore, the handbook cautioned U.S. Army readers accustomed to a definite separation between civil and military functions that “the present [GVN] government cannot be divided simply into ‘civil organization’ and ‘military organization’.” The handbook also predicted that despite the trend towards constitutional representation, for the foreseeable future South Vietnamese military officers would continue to occupy “government positions concerned only with civilian functions.”<sup>51</sup>

49. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1968), 12, Box 186, Organizational History Files, Military Historian’s Office, Records of HQ, U.S. Army, Pacific, RG 550, NARA II.

50. Tran Dinh Tho, *Indochina Monographs: Pacification* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 181.

51. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 11.

At the provincial level, the province chief served as the ranking civil and military GVN official. Usually a colonel or lieutenant colonel in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the province chief obtained his office by presidential decree and recommendation of the corps commander. The province chief reported to the corps commander for military affairs and to the central government in Saigon for most other administrative and pacification functions.<sup>52</sup> As the *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification* noted, “the province chief is, as an individual, responsible for all government functions within his province.”<sup>53</sup> The province chief directly controlled all Regional Forces (RF) companies in his province and through his subordinate district chiefs all Popular Forces (PF) platoons assigned to individual villages. Although the province chief retained operational control over National Police and Revolutionary Development assets operating in his province, these agencies also operated within their own bureaucracies to Saigon. Similarly, ARVN tactical forces also stood outside of the province chief’s direct control unless specifically committed to a specific Revolutionary Development or pacification mission by the division or corps commander. For civil administration resources, the whims of Saigon politics directly affected the province chief’s budget. Thus, for all of his sweeping responsibilities, the province chief possessed little power to enforce his authority when compared to the all-powerful position occupied by the VC cadres opposing him in the villages. The political bargaining skills needed to succeed (or merely survive) in such an environment often put the motives of these officers at odds with their U.S. advisors who usually preferred direct, immediate, and relentless action against the VC. The conventional wisdom holds that the friction in these relationships usually resulted from the advisor’s typical one-year tour in Vietnam, in contrast to his Vietnamese counterpart’s lifetime tour. In more than a few instances, though, the political maneuvering of the South Vietnamese officers

52. Tho, *Pacification*, 38.

53. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 14.

produced a revolving door of Vietnamese province and district chiefs changing every month while only the U.S. advisor remained constant.<sup>54</sup>

The province chief administered his fiefdom through subordinate district chiefs, who held ranks between lieutenant and major, depending on the importance of the district, capabilities (both administrative and political) of the officer, and combat attrition. Thua Thien province was divided into ten districts and the city of Hue, a city further divided into three districts and usually administered separately from the rest of the province.<sup>55</sup> At district level the military government of the GVN interacted with a rural peasant political organization largely unchanged since feudal days.

In abstract, the struggle to define how these feudal peasant political organizations would be brought into the 20<sup>th</sup> century fueled the ongoing insurgency in South Vietnam. Under previous colonial and imperial regimes, the peasants extracted a form of limited self-rule and isolation in exchange for their neutrality and acquiescence in national affairs to the dominant urban or colonial power. This resulted in the often-cited Vietnamese maxim that “the king’s law bows before village custom.”<sup>56</sup> The

54. Robert Selzer, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Report, Quang Dien District, dated 27 June 1968,” p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection. The district advisor noted that “On 19 June 1968, CPT Tran Tien Dao returned as the District Chief. This makes the 4<sup>th</sup> change of district chief in as many months.” See also Thomas Bowen, “Thua Thien Report for the Period ending 31 July 1968, dated 4 August 1968,” p. 8. The provincial senior advisor’s report expresses dismay at control and whims of Saigon: “The District Chiefs of Huong Thuy and Phu Loc were reportedly removed by order of the Central Government. While the actions were justified, in Advisory opinions, the failure to consult with the Province Chief prior to this announcement subverted his authority within Province channels.”

55. Earl Thieme, “Thua Thien Report for the Period ending 31 March 1968, dated 4 April 1968,” Advisory Team 18 Collection. The provincial report was usually five to ten pages long, each subordinate district filed a one or two page narrative attached to the provincial report that as a baseline included the status of pacification, advisor name and rank, and district chief name and rank.

56. R. Michael Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*. RM-5533-1-ARPA, prepared for Advanced Research Projects Agency, May 1969 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1969), 18. After extensive study of Vietnamese rural society, Pierce claims that village autonomy was a peasant myth borne of isolation and ignorance. The peasants, however, developed this myth into the popular proverb quoted above.



objectives and methods of the communist insurgency made continued isolation and neutrality impossible, however. Douglas Pike, in his 1966 study *Viet Cong*, concludes that the “revolutionary guerrilla warfare as practiced in Vietnam” sought “to establish a totally new social order, thus differing from insurgencies whose objective is either statehood or change of government.”<sup>57</sup> As one 1969 RAND study of the Vietnamese peasantry found, “family, subsistence, and subservience” and not social revolutionary historically characterized the traditional Vietnamese peasant.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the villages and hamlets of rural South Vietnam became the battleground between communists seeking ruthlessly to unify Vietnam under their ideology and a GVN haphazardly attempting to define one.

Realizing this, the Department of Defense expended significant intellectual capital throughout the war commissioning studies and attempting to understand the mechanisms of how the VC came to control these villages so strongly while the GVN’s influence usually proved transient. These studies found that subservience to others who owned his land and controlled his local government constituted the fundamental fact of life for the lowest rung of Vietnamese peasant. A few families of landed gentry usually controlled local village political and legal systems by restricting membership in village councils to several elite families and selecting the village chief from this select group.<sup>59</sup> Although not wealthy by urban standards, as their plots of land rarely exceeded ten acres, these village elites retained coercive legal and economic powers over their tenant-farming neighbors. Researchers also discovered that “later colonial administrations isolated and reinforced this system in order to retain control over rural areas.”<sup>60</sup>

While many Vietnamese joined or supported the Viet Cong out of nationalistic motivations, this cause could only provide fighters for VC units and not the secure base

57. Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1966), 32.

58. Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 13.

59. *Ibid.*, 16.

60. *Ibid.*, 19.

areas and underground support network required for a successful insurgent campaign.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the communist exploitation of the anachronistic village political system found throughout rural South Vietnam proved to be their most enduring method of controlling swaths of villages whose loyalties might otherwise be divided. Pike theorized that “the purpose of this vast organizational structure was ... to restructure the village social order and train the villagers to control themselves. This was the [communists’] one undeviating thrust from the start” and not simply military operations against soldiers or merely occupying territory.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, the elimination of guerrilla fighters and the physical occupation of the villages by the GVN only indirectly contributed to the defeat of communist objectives as long as this organizational infrastructure remained.

One study stylized the VC approach to taking over a village as a five-step process of: *recognition* by the revolutionary elite of conditions within the traditional village environment that are potentially exploitable for insurgency; *adaptation* of revolutionary activities to the recognized pre-insurgency conditions; *disruption* of the traditional patterns of administrative and social conditions; *domination* of the peasants through revolutionary organizations created in the villages; *direction* of all activities in

61. Konrad Kellen, *Conversations with enemy soldiers in late 1968/early 1969: A study of Motivation and Morale*. RM-6131-1-ISA, prepared for the Office of the Asst. SecDEF/International/Security Affairs and the Advanced Research Projects Agency, September 1970, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1970), v. “Both northerners and southerners seem[ed] to feel that their struggle against ‘the Americans’ [was] not merely justified, but a national necessity.”

62. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 111. Pike’s passage as written: “The purpose of this vast organizational effort was not simply population control but to restructure the social order of the village and train the villagers to control themselves. This was the NLF’s [National Liberation Front’s] one undeviating thrust from the start. Not the killing of ARVN soldiers, not the occupation of real estate, not the preparation for some pitched battle at an Armageddon or a Dien Bien Phu but organization in depth of the rural population through the instrument of self control – victory through organization.” Although Pike published this succinct summary of communist objectives in Vietnam in 1966, many writers continue to accurately observe the phenomenon, yet misinterpret the objectives of the communist insurgency in Vietnam.

the villages to provide continuing support for the war.<sup>63</sup> In his study of VC tactics, Pike found that the typical South Vietnamese village was “vulnerable to this kind of assault” and thus “became a battleground in a peculiar kind of struggle, part political, part military, and wholly social.”<sup>64</sup> When the communist cadres succeeded, they transformed the old social order in the village and forces inside the village normally proved unable to overthrow the new communist order. The VC cadre and their allies within the village controlled all aspects of village life – politics, agriculture, recreation, and manpower were all directed to support the insurgency.

Thus, with the proper conditions, what might start as a squad-sized element of VC cadre entering at night to proselytize amongst the villagers could, in several months, metastasize into a fortified village containing a local-force VC platoon and available as a base of operations for larger VC and NVA main force units. The Department of Defense specialists researching the VC recognized the work of these “elite group[s] that can organize the peasants and develop a revolutionary base in the rural villages” as equally important to the “mass of recruits, supplies, information, and sanctuaries” that together formed “the enduring strength of the VC in its revolutionary war against the GVN.” Although the GVN attempted to create parallel organizations to counter the work of the VC cadres in the villages, none proved as effective and tenacious as the guerrilla leadership. As an analysis of VC prisoner of war interrogations conducted in late 1968 and early 1969 summarized after several severe VC setbacks, “they [the VC cadres] can perhaps be killed, but they probably cannot be dissuaded by either words or hardships.”<sup>65</sup>

### **“The mistakes as well as successes of the past”:**

#### **Roles of U.S. and GVN Pacification Forces**

The method of VC operations, therefore, was not a mystery to U.S. and South Vietnamese officials. Devising effective countermeasures to the insurgency, however, had thus far eluded both. If the communist infrastructure could be characterized as

63. Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, ix.

64. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 110.

65. Kellen, *Conversations with enemy soldiers in late 1968/early 1969*, 102.

austere, flexible elements efficiently using resources – with the exception of the lives of its members – and under centralized control, the GVN/U.S. response would be exactly the opposite: a multitude of narrowly-focused elements profligately expending money and material under several parallel and sometimes competing chains-of-command. As the *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification* recalled defensively in early 1968, “present objectives do not differ in significant points from former programs and plans, both GVN and US planners have benefited from the mistakes as well as successes of the past.”<sup>66</sup>

These mistakes and successes were the product of a complicated and diffuse set of organizations deployed in South Vietnam to fight the war as the organizational diagram drawn from the *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification* in Appendix B shows.<sup>67</sup> The GVN deployed two military and paramilitary forces in the field. The ARVN consisted of nine infantry divisions normally tied to a geographic region along with a marine and airborne division held in reserve. These formations were armed and organized on the conventional U.S. model. Originally designed to combat North Vietnamese conventional units, the ARVN did not assume formal responsibility for supporting the counterinsurgency campaign (or Revolutionary Development, as it was formally known at the time) until mid-1966 as U.S. units began to take over their primary function of finding and fixing communist main force units.<sup>68</sup> The ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division, normally considered one of the better South Vietnamese divisions by U.S. advisors, was the primary GVN tactical formation operating in Thua Thein province.<sup>69</sup>

66. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 2.

67. See Appendix B: MACV Advisory Organization for the complex relationship between the various U.S. advisors, their chain of command, and the South Vietnamese they advised.

68. *Ibid.*, 3.

69. Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69*, 75. Some 1<sup>st</sup> Division officers and their units also openly joined the Buddhist opposition to Saigon in 1966. Surprisingly, the available advisory team records indicate 1<sup>st</sup> Division rarely conducted pacification operations independent of U.S. formations. Most recorded pacification operations with U.S. forces involved RF/PF and NPPF rather than ARVN units. The ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division

The primary military forces used to fight the communist insurgency were the lightly-armed territorial forces, the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). These units constituted roughly half of the numerical strength of the GVN armed forces and were theoretically indispensable to combating the VC insurgency. These units were composed of foot-mobile infantry squads and platoons armed with rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers, but having no heavier weapons, indirect fire support, or battalion-level staff or logistical support. Whatever the theoretical requirements, the ground truth of their actual performance is difficult to establish but will be elaborated on later in more detailed examples. In personal recollections, U.S. officers working with RF and PF units were often harsh in their criticism of the combat capabilities of these outfits and cynical about their potential.<sup>70</sup> In official after action reviews, U.S. officers were more upbeat and understanding of the limitations of the territorial units.<sup>71</sup> Finally, at least one noted analyst determined that the RF and PF were “dollar for dollar, the most effective large force in killing communist troops in South Vietnam.”<sup>72</sup>

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also was one of the principal units involved in the LAM SON 719 attack into Laos in 1971 where it performed well but sustained high casualties.

70. Victor E. Stamey, “Interview with LTC James I. Daily,” p. 19, Box 10, Company Command In Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI. As a captain, Dailey commanded B Company, 2-327 Infantry of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne from July to December 1968. He recalled one particular operation with a PF platoon: “They had no capability, they were pushing drugs, they were pushing women, yet we were expected to integrate them into our rifle companies .... We virtually had no control over them, but yet, they were kind of stinking up the AO [Area of Operations], I thought that was a very poor operation, at best.”

71. 22nd Military History Detachment, “Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 December 1969 to 31 March 1970, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” p. 6, Box 25, After Action Reports, Headquarters, United States Army, Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. The after action report stated in more measured tones that “the increased effectiveness of Popular Forces and improved leadership qualities exhibited in RF and PF units are evidence that training efforts have resulted in substantial progress.”

72. Thomas Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 165. Thayer wonders “if 30 percent of the communist casualties can be attained for only 4 percent of the resources, what might have happened if the allies had allocated 10 percent of the resources to the territorial forces.”

Whatever combat efficiency RF/PF units developed later in the war, the Tet offensive in 1968 proved more than a match for almost all territorial forces in Thua Thien province. As the U.S. provincial senior advisor observed in his March 1968 report that “the Tet offensive in late January disrupted all [Revolutionary Development] efforts in the countryside, and effectively destroyed all semblance of GVN rule until late February.”<sup>73</sup> The communist attack pulverized most PF platoons beyond combat effectiveness and they simply evaporated, while the Revolutionary Development teams they supposedly protected “were withdrawn to the respective district headquarters and used as security forces in the defense of these isolated compounds,” thus interrupting GVN influence in these villages.<sup>74</sup> The RF companies that withstood the initial attacks similarly “withdrew ... into the city [Hue] and into defensive positions around the district headquarters compounds.”<sup>75</sup>

In addition to these two military organizations, the GVN initially deployed two primary paramilitary forces in the counter-insurgency fight. The Ministry of Revolutionary Development deployed lightly-armed, 59-man Revolutionary Development (RD) teams to increase GVN influence and legitimacy as a counter to the VC cadre system.<sup>76</sup> The other primary GVN paramilitary counterinsurgency organization was the National Police. Along with their roles as standard civil law

73. Thieme, “Thua Thien Report for the Period ending 31 March 1968, dated 4 April 1968,” p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection. The Tet attacks not only disrupted GVN control of the countryside but also disrupted the MACV reporting bureaucracy, a far more permanent and formidable organization. No reports exist for the months of January and February, 1968, the only such gaps in the existence of Advisory Group 18. The reporting bureaucracy functioned throughout the communist 1972 offensive which captured Quang Tri province and nearly overran Thua Thien.

74. Ibid. February 1968 was a very fluid time for Advisory Group 18. Thieme admitted that sequence of events was merely “as best [as] can be reconstructed.”

75. Ibid.

76. Tho, *Pacification*, pp. 51-55. The RD teams were reorganized several times during the war. After Tet 1968, RD teams were 39-man organizations. By 1971, the technical and administrative functions of the non-security portions of the RD teams were absorbed by the various GVN ministries.

enforcement officers, the National Police controlled the National Police Field Force (NPF) and the Special Police (SP) to fight the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI).

The NPF was an arm of the National Police specially created as an “exploitation force, employed offensively and aggressively in the attack against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI).”<sup>77</sup> These units were even more lightly armed than the territorial forces, but were “designed, trained, and equipped to operate in rural areas which the armed forces cleared of enemy main force units but in which VC guerilla, terrorist, and other elements of the [VC] infrastructure prevent the civil government from functioning in a normal way.”<sup>78</sup> Three companies of the NPF initially operated in Thua Thien.

Whereas the NPF functioned as an overt police striking force to combat VCI in newly-swept villages, the Special Police operated undercover as the intelligence-gathering arm of the GVN police apparatus. NPF units were typically assigned to work with tactical military units as companies or platoons. The Special Police operated alone or in small groups against a wide variety of targets as “the primary internal intelligence and security arm of the GVN.”<sup>79</sup> Although primarily directed against the VCI, Special Police missions also included “maintaining files on potentially powerful political organizations, guarding of VIP’s,” and counter-narcotics tasks.<sup>80</sup> The Special Police and their multi-faceted set of missions should not be confused with the Provincial Reconnaissance Units and Status Census Grievance units (usually referred to as simply “census grievance units”) that fought specifically against the VCI and enjoyed greater success later in the war.

77. Hq., 5-46 Infantry, “Guide For Hamlet Pacification,” p. B-1, Cabinet C4, Drawer 5, Miscellaneous Unit Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI. Hereafter referred to as “5-46 IN Pacification Guide.”

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

In December 1967, there were 2541 National Police on duty in Thua Thien, of which 340 belonged to the NPF and nearly 500 to the Special Police.<sup>81</sup> In the period before the 1968 Tet offensive, almost all police efforts were deployed inside Hue to the neglect of the outlying hamlets and villages where the VC steadily solidified their control.<sup>82</sup> When these NPF units did conduct limited operations in the field, the results were more often the capture of “illegal residents” than VC. The NPF posted these results not in secure sector cleared of VC influence, but in an area that would experience an unprecedented armed uprising only eight weeks later, indicating the police ineptitude and indifference to conditions in the rural areas outside Hue.<sup>83</sup> For their part, the Special Police “continue[ed] to crackdown on black marketeers,” but proved similarly unable to identify the growing VC threat.<sup>84</sup> Although the Tet offensive ultimately did not prove fatal to pacification efforts in Thua Thien province, the success of the communist effort laid bare the inadequacies of the territorial forces and police to provide security for the GVN’s citizens. Both organizations would be re-built from the latter half of 1968 onwards with an intensified advisory effort, improved equipment and techniques, and combined operations with the battalions of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division.

81. Louis Spalla, “Monthly Public Safety Field Force Report for December 1967, dated 3 January 1968,” Chart, Box 9, General Records, Office of Civil Operations for Rural Development Support, MR1 Public Safety Division, RG 472, NARA II.

82. Jack Sanders, “Monthly Public Safety Field Force Report for November 1967, dated 4 December 1967,” p. 2. The provincial CORDS police advisor recorded in November 1967 that “During the past 30 days several joint operations with Marine companies have been conducted. This is especially noteworthy when it is realized that at least 2 years of advisory effort has been applied without success prior to this time. Difficulty is still being encountered concerning the use of the police outside the Hue city.”

83. Sanders, “Monthly Public Safety Field Force Report for November 1967, dated 4 December 1967,” un-numbered semi-monthly NPF Organizational Report for NPF Company 106 for the period 1-30 November 1967 report within document. The 106<sup>th</sup> NPF Company was by far the most active of Thua Thien’s three NPF companies during this period. In seven independent platoon-sized operations and one company-size cordon and search operation conducted with 2/26 Marines, the 106<sup>th</sup> netted 24 illegal residents and one VC suspect who was later released.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 2.



Unlike the territorial forces and police counterinsurgency forces, the Revolutionary Development teams largely faded in importance after Tet '68. Their role in interacting with the populace gradually came to be taken over by the various GVN territorial security apparatuses and their political development role receded as land reform and other GVN social programs came to be managed more directly from President Nguyen Van Thieu and other GVN ministries instead of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development. The Revolutionary Development team concept originated as the GVN counter to VC cadres and sought to “combat the communist insurgents by supporting the rural population in providing security, assisting the maintenance of democratic institutions, and aiding in the channeling of administrative and technical services from the GVN to the rural population.”<sup>85</sup> The first RD teams graduated from the Ministry of Revolutionary Development’s central academy in Vung Tau in May 1966 and even though the director of the RD cadre school was a former Viet Minh battalion commander who rallied to the GVN cause, these teams never achieved the effectiveness of their communist counterparts.<sup>86</sup>

In early 1968, twenty-one RD teams operated in Thua Thien province, but due to the poor security situation, most of these could not remain in their assigned villages at night despite the fact that each team contained over thirty armed members.<sup>87</sup> In spite of such vigorous combat operations as Carentan I & II undertaken by U.S. units in Thua Thien immediately after the Tet offensive, during April 1968 the Thua Thien provincial senior advisor still reported that “the large number of hostile forces [were] exercising

85. Hq., 5-46 Infantry, “5-46 IN pacification Guide,” B-2.

86. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 4. See also Tho, *Pacification*, 162. Tho asserts that the pacification czar in charge of the RD program, Major General Nguyen Duc Thang “was the perfect match for his new U.S. counterpart, Ambassador Robert Komer, and equally positive leader and hard-driver . . . . But all these outward manifestations betrayed an obsessive preoccupation with appearances which led to the tendency of substituting statistical results for true achievements.”

87. See Monthly Province and District Reports for Advisory Group 18, March to June 1968. Although there were exceptions during this period, the overwhelming majority of RD teams were withdrawn from villages and those that were re-inserted normally could not remain during hours of darkness due to poor security.

almost absolute control over the overwhelming majority of the rural population.”<sup>88</sup> The GVN was powerless to either gain rural legitimacy through reform, or at the very least, deprive the communists of their critical sanctuaries until these hostile forces could be ejected from the hamlets of Thua Thien.

The theoretical responsibility for tactical planning and execution of any pacification campaign plan rested with the province chief even though these tasks usually exceeded the resources available to him. Aside from material and jurisdiction problems, most province chiefs also lacked the expertise to lead and plan effective counterinsurgent operations. As one GVN officer later acknowledged, “officers did not always possess a thorough understanding of the pacification concept and its programs. As a result, most of the planning was initiated and undertaken by the U.S. side.”<sup>89</sup> Ironically, most U.S. officers had little formal education in pacification operations or coordinating the multi-agency pacification effort other than what could be gained during experience serving in Vietnam.

The American advisory effort existed through two parallel organizations, with purely military advisors attached to regular ARVN formations from battalion through division levels and separate, civilian-military teams operating in the districts and provinces. The officers attached to ARVN units were only indirectly involved in the pacification effort when their parent units were assigned direct pacification support missions. As the *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification* stated, “by exercising its influence through advisory channels, MACV guides and advises the ARVN in the execution of that part of its mission related to the military support of pacification.”<sup>90</sup> For the officers and Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) civilians assigned to the provincial advisory teams, on the other hand, pacification was their primary mission. A 1966 MACV memo on the role of these provincial advisors listed their diverse responsibilities as ranging from “providing advice and support to

88. Thieme, “Thua Thien Report for the Period ending 30 April 1968, dated 4 May 1968,” p. 2, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

89. Tho, *Pacification*, 86.

90. Hq., 5-46 Infantry, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 31.

defeat outright guerrilla warfare” in some provinces to “coordinating, directing, and supporting numerous civilian development projects, and assisting district and province staffs in civil administration” in others.<sup>91</sup>

Advisory Team 18 served as the U.S. provincial advisory effort in Thua Thien province, deploying eight teams to assist in the pacification of the various districts and a large civilian administration advisory effort in Hue.<sup>92</sup> Each district team consisted of two officers (slotted for a major and a captain as his assistant) and two non-commissioned officers (a senior medic and a radio operator). Depending on the insurgent environment, priority of the district, and availability of specialists, this district team could be augmented by low-ranking intelligence, engineering, security, or police advisors.<sup>93</sup> These district teams reported to the provincial senior advisor. Because the provincial advisory teams fell under CORDS purview, the provincial senior advisor could be a military officer or a civilian. In cases where the senior advisor was a military officer, a civilian usually served as his deputy.<sup>94</sup> For most of 1968, Colonel Thomas Bowen, an armor officer, served as the provincial senior officer while Earl Thieme served as his civilian deputy. Both men served multiple advisory tours in Vietnam and Bowen later served as the senior U.S. military advisor to South Vietnamese forces opposing the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive as a brigadier general in 1972.

Aside from their advisory and planning roles, provincial advisors also played an important role in reporting and measuring the progress or lack of progress of pacification. The Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) became the primary tool for officials to measure pacification. As the instructions in the beginning of a 1969 version

91. Hq., MACV, “Directive 525-15: Combat Operations, Organization and Deployment of U.S. Advisory Teams at Province and District Level,” p. 1, Box 38, Administrative Services Division, MACV Adjutant General, RG 472, NARA II.

92. Advisory Team 18 was referred to as Advisory Team 3 before September, 1968. All records for the Thua Thien provincial advisory team are filed under Advisory Team 18.

93. Hq., MACV, “Directive 525-15: Combat Operations, Organization and Deployment of U.S. Advisory Teams at Province and District Level,” Annex A..

94. Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, 30.

of a HES handbook reminded the evaluator; “From these data, reports are prepared by MACCORDS-RAD [Military Advisory Command, CORDS – Reports and Analysis Division] and forwarded to the highest level of government .... It is essential, therefore, that the processing of the components of the HES reports be accomplished reliably and expeditiously.”<sup>95</sup>

The HES attempted to take the ‘feel’ out of assessing pacification progress by asking specific, uniform questions of the district advisors throughout South Vietnam about the security and development of their villages and hamlets. The 1969 version of the survey contained fifty-eight questions divided into twelve sections ranging from “Enemy Presence” to “Education” and “Land Tenure” for each village and a similar number and scope of questions for the lower, hamlet level.<sup>96</sup> These questions were general enough to be applied throughout the country and forced the evaluator to answer in one of several multiple choice answers that encompassed a wide range of possible situations, or allowed the evaluator to acknowledge that he had insufficient information to answer accurately.<sup>97</sup> At the end of each evaluation, the district advisor also noted where his information came from and if his evaluation agreed with that of his superior.

As a May 1968 study of Hamlet Evaluation System reliability found, the overall validity of quantifying pacification was “impossible to prove.” However, this study did find that the *inputs* – the answers to the questions posed in the HES surveys themselves-- were reliably reported and that “HES, as a total system, is basically sound as a reporting device for the entire country and for political divisions down to the district level.”<sup>98</sup> The study further concluded that “HES is a reasonably reliable method of estimating security

95. CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, *Hamlet Evaluation System Handbook, June 1969*, p. 3, Box 20, General Records, Advisory Team 18, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

96. *Ibid.*, sections C.1 and C.2

97. *Ibid.*, section C.1.2.

98. Ithiel de Sola Pool, Gordon Fowler, Peter McGrath, and Richard Peterson, “Hamlet Evaluation System Study, 1 May 1968,” p. 1, Box 61 of 431, Center for Military History Re-files, unfiled as of August 2005, NARA II.

trends” even though the “reliability of the development factors is less clear.”<sup>99</sup> At the individual hamlet level, however, the system proved less reliable due to individual reporting discrepancies even though “the evidence indicates that advisors are not inflating their ratings.”<sup>100</sup>

Aside from the fundamental and ultimately unanswerable question of the validity of attempting to quantify pacification, the other main objection to the HES ratings arose from the difficulty in visiting all of the villages and hamlets in a particular district. Some officers doubted that “even if all the time available were devoted to visits ... no one could possibly cover all the villages and hamlets of a district in a single month.”<sup>101</sup> The sizes and administrative divisions within a district clearly impacted the detail of each observation and the frequency of each visit and this was often independent of population. For example, in Thua Thien province, Phu Vang district contained seventy-one thousand people spread among only five villages and twenty-two hamlets, while Phu Loc district contained sixty-one thousand people in eight villages and eighty-three hamlets. In contrast, the remote Nam Hoa district contained only six thousand inhabitants but fourteen widely-scattered villages and twenty-nine hamlets.<sup>102</sup>

Despite these limitations, the Hamlet Evaluation System survey appears in hindsight to be a useful tool in measuring pacification progress when taken in conjunction with anecdotal evidence provided from other sources. As the narrative examples taken from the provincial advisors will indicate, these men did not usually shy away from giving their unvarnished observations. Still, even if the HES data indicated an area of “B-rated” villages (or generally adequate security and development) and observer accounts did not specifically mention an area, its relatively secure status should

99. Ibid., p. 1. HES primarily measured military security and social, political, and economic development.

100. Ibid., p. 2.

101. Tho, *Pacification*, 107-8.

102. CORDS Reports and Analysis Directorate, “HES Information Report; Thua Thien Province Data Print-out, dated 31 August 1970.” Seven of Nam Hoa’s fourteen villages were reported as having a population of one because of the bureaucratic difficulty of officially removing a destroyed or abandoned village from the HES tracking mechanism.

be doubted if the combat log reports several ambushes, or the CORDS police log records acts of VC terror. Therefore HES data, observer narratives, and operational indicators such as the type of combat operations undertaken or not required in a particular area give a good indication of just how pacified an area was at any time.

**“The 1968 Provincial RD Plan was lying in the rubble of Hue city:”**

**A Prologue to the Pacification of Thua Thien**

Advisory team reports from the months immediately before January 1968 gave a steady stream of GVN progress in combating the VC and showed no sign of the impending communist offensive.<sup>103</sup> The observations filed when normal reporting resumed in late March 1968 give a different account of the pacification task that lay ahead for Thua Thien province. Before the offensive, most VC activity was confined to the countryside and outside of Hue city. The CORDS pacification report stated bleakly that “The 1968 Provincial RD Plan was lying in the rubble of Hue city” and that after the city center was alternately occupied by the VC and then destroyed in the fighting to eject them “one out of every two inhabitants of Hue has become a refugee.”<sup>104</sup> In March 1968 the deputy senior provincial advisor assessed that twenty-two enemy main force battalions were operating in Thua Thien and that “at night, the enemy can move freely and harass or launch limited attacks at their choosing” despite the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division sweeps targeted on main force units that “have forced the enemy to break down into smaller, constantly moving units.”<sup>105</sup> Earl Thieme went on to forecast that “unless exceptional measures are taken, the rice crop would well be lost to the enemy when the harvest starts in late April.”<sup>106</sup> Protecting this rice harvest and not any revolutionary

103. See “Monthly Public Safety Field Force Report for November 1967, dated 4 December 1967,” and “Monthly Public Safety Field Force Report for December 1967, dated 3 January 1968,” for an indication of the rosy police picture leading up to Tet ’68.

104. Thieme, “Thua Thien Report for the Period ending 31 March 1968, dated 4 April 1968,” p. 2. Advisory Group 18 Collection.

105. Ibid., p. 6.

106. Ibid., p. 6. The rice of Thua Thien province was essential logistically for NVA and VC main force units.

pacification plan generated by a cabal of visionary officers would drive the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's initial involvement in population security operations.

In the outlying districts, the 1968 Tet offensive produced diverse effects. In Quang Dien, the district advisor reported that "all villages along [Highway 1] are under GVN control and are reasonably secure, except during the hours of darkness."<sup>107</sup> Perhaps the best single analysis of the effects of the Tet combat on pacification came from the Huong Tra district advisor. Once he could regain access to his sector, Major Jack E. Walker reported that "the 1967 Rural Development Area was almost completely destroyed due to friendly bombing and artillery. The area was overcome by a large NVA troop concentration and was used as a staging area in the Hue attack." Not to be outdone, the communists also applied their own version of violence to the citizenry when "prior to the departure of the NVA, many civilian officials, PF and other persons actively supporting the GVN were killed." The district advisor recorded dryly that "this could have seriously hampered the effort to win these people wholly to GVN. The friendly bombing could not have had a dissimilar effect, even though its purpose was purely military, in that the NVA had to be dislodged."<sup>108</sup>

As for the future, Major Walker believed that "these conditions have left the people of this area in a questionable status of pacification. The most adequate description would have to be that the people are in a state of flux, supporting no one government fully but rather living a day-to-day personal existence." The eviction of the NVA still did not solve the problem because "even though RF and PF troops have been re-inserted, they can not provide the degree of security required to allay all popular fears of the return of the NVA for a second Hue offensive." Finally, to illustrate the uneven effect of the offensive, the district advisor stated that "other areas of the district which were to be included within the 1968 RD plan have not been so seriously affected."<sup>109</sup>

107. Selzer, "MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Quang Dien District Report, dated 28 March 1968," single page, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

108. Walker, "MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Huong Tra District Report, dated 28 March 1968," p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

109. Ibid.

The inadequacy of rural security and destruction caused by the Tet combat weighed heavily on the populace as evidenced by other district advisor reports. Major James E. Davis, the Huong Thuy district advisor, reported that “the enemy maintains the capability of attacking the majority of hamlets in this district at a time of his choosing” and that “4342 homes [were] damaged during battle.”<sup>110</sup> Additionally, “three of the four New Life Hamlets selected for the 1968 program are now controlled by the NVA/VC. The fourth has two VC squads permanently assigned.” Overall, Davis discovered that “of the ten New Life Hamlets in the 1967 program, three hamlets are NVA/VC controlled and the remainder are contested.”<sup>111</sup>

For the future, Major Davis cautioned that “the decreased security in many of the hamlets detracts considerably from the pacification effort ... [because] the people in this district are aware of the threat of a second offensive and are therefore guarded in their acceptance of civic action and pacification projects proposed by Free World Forces operating in the district.” In most areas, communist takeover meant a death-sentence for any village leader or active supporter of the GVN and on the other hand, as one advisor reported “the citizens of this district continue to suffer bodily injury, death and property damage caused by combat activities of RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] and FWF [Free World Forces].”<sup>112</sup> When caught between U.S. firepower and

110. James Davis, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Huong Thuy District Report, dated 28 March 1968,” p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid. For account of the effects of communist assassination of village leadership see George Franklin, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Phu Loc District Report, dated 28 April 1968,” p. 1. See also Maxwell Norris, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Nam Hoa District Report, dated 28 April 1968,” p. 1. For further accounts of the effects of firepower on VC sanctuaries see Walker, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Huong Tra District Report, dated 28 April 1968,” p. 1. All from Advisory Team 18 Collection. The district advisor claimed that “an estimated 85% of the district is under government control .... Several hamlets which would have heretofore been listed as questionable, have as a result of operations, been destroyed and thereby eliminated as an area of VC operation.” Interestingly, this report of 85% GVN control also shows the impact of initial U.S. and GVN operations to restore sovereignty in the intense post-Tet combat.



communist assassination squads, the existence of the Vietnamese villager was both tenuous and tragic. For most villagers in this environment, the appeal of ideology certainly paled in comparison to the appeal of relative peace. Their allegiances would most likely be won by the side that could provide lasting security first.

**CHAPTER III**  
**“IF WE’D HAD DONE MORE THAN THAT EARLIER IT COULD HAVE**  
**BEEN DIFFERENT”:**  
**THE 101<sup>st</sup> AIRBORNE DISCOVERS PACIFICATION,**  
**MAY 1968 – DECEMBER 1969**

The Tet offensive placed most Viet Cong (VC) Infrastructure and local force units in Thua Thien province in a precarious position. On one hand, the communists demonstrated considerable capability and delivered significant psychological shock by occupying portions of the provincial capital and several district headquarters. On the other, their forces and administrators operated openly and attempted to retain significant portions of territory conventionally for the first time in the lowlands in the face of a powerful American force. Although the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s intelligence section estimated enemy strength as approximately seven thousand strong in March 1968, during Operations Carentan I & II, the division inflicted devastating casualties on the communist units.<sup>113</sup> This heavy fighting first stemmed communist momentum and then pounded their forces into full-scale retreat during the first five months of 1968 as VC and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units attempted unsuccessfully to hold their gains in the lowlands.

The outcome of the 101<sup>st</sup>’s operations differed only in scale to previous actions elsewhere in Vietnam that occasionally led to premature predictions of the demise of the Viet Cong. These predictions, usually based on inflated body counts, a favorable kill ratio, material captured or destroyed, and the enemy leaving the battlefield, almost always failed to come true as a shadowy and resolute insurgency returned as soon as the U.S. units involved in the latest big sweep moved on the next hot spot. In May 1968, the

113. Hq. 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” Attached document: “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” p. 1, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

U.S. and South Vietnamese forces once again gained the opportunity to pacify the countryside as surviving NVA units retreated to their sanctuaries and the VC attempted to melt away and regroup in the lowlands under intense pressure from U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalions. Unlike earlier actions in other locations, though, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's nine-month Operation Nevada Eagle (May 1968 – February 1969) proved a remarkably successful and flexible exploitation of the enemy's overextension during the Tet offensive. Similarly, the three divisional operations that followed Nevada Eagle from February 1969 to December 1969 consolidated these gains and made the still-evolving U.S. policy of Vietnamization possible in Thua Thien province. The tactics and techniques devised and refined during Nevada Eagle did not prove universally effective or applicable even within Thua Thien province, but overall they proved adaptable and more than adequate to provide the province's citizens the essential first step in pacification – security from enemy forces.

**“Thus far little had been accomplished by the division in the pacification field”:**

**The Transformation of Operation Nevada Eagle**

In this statement, the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jim I. Hunt, referred to the period before 5 June 1968, when the last sizeable enemy concentrations broke contact after sustaining significant losses north and east of Hue.<sup>114</sup> Before this time, units of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division maintained almost constant contact with organized enemy battalions and had little opportunity or incentive for pacification operations. After crushing this last pocket of conventional resistance, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne accomplished the first goal of Operation Nevada Eagle, “to clear the lowlands of NVA units,” and took its first tentative steps in dedicated pacification operations.<sup>115</sup>

114. Jim I. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” *U.S. Army War College Case Study, 9 March 1970*, p.11, Folder 19, Box 141, Center for Military History Refiles, Records of the U.S. Army Staff, RG 319, NARA II.

115. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969; dated 19 April 1969,” p. 5.

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division began Nevada Eagle on 17 May 1968 with the primary mission of locating enemy base areas and interdicting his lines of infiltration, secondarily protecting “vital GVN lines of communication and population centers,” and only lastly “ferreting out and destroying the enemy infrastructure in the lowlands” and “promoting the overall GVN pacification plan.”<sup>116</sup> At the outset, then, Nevada Eagle did not represent a significant philosophical shift in U.S. counter-insurgency practices. The division’s order of priorities, find and destroy enemy main forces, protect major cities, and only then attack enemy infrastructure and assist pacification, did not differ substantially from most other previous U.S. operations. In practice, however, the enemy’s main force units and larger local force units remained elusive and mostly hidden in their sanctuaries in Laos and the A Shau Valley. Therefore, during June and July 1968, the 101<sup>st</sup> fulfilled the first two priorities with moderately decreasing losses and significantly decreasing enemy contact. Battalions continued to conduct near-constant Reconnaissance in Force (RIF) missions that one company commander characterized as “literally walking out ... and looking for bad guys” with little detailed intelligence, but these operations began to run into more booby traps and fewer organized communist units.<sup>117</sup>

Communist losses from stiffer-than-expected U.S. and GVN resistance to their Tet offensive enabled the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to truly concentrate on pacification for the first time, yet the division’s initiatives evolved over time based on conditions, opportunities, and emerging capabilities, instead of shifting rapidly based on planning

116. Ibid., p. 6.

117. Richard Davis, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett,” p. V-4, Box 4, Company Command In Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI. For a division-level account of this period, the division’s after action report stated that “In the period 5 June to 4 August, the Division’s operations were characterized by infrequent enemy contact; increased booby trap incidents and the capture of enemy rice caches.... Of the 40 U.S. KIA and 375 U.S. WIA from 4 June to 31 July, guerrilla-emplaced booby traps, usually hand grenades or 105 mm rounds with trip wire devices attached, accounted for 18 U.S. KIA and 173 U.S. WIA. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969; dated 19 April 1969,” p. 17.

and theory. Organizational inertia certainly played some small part in this gradual change, as did the much larger determination to avoid a second Tet offensive and damage to Hue. Early on in Nevada Eagle, these factors kept most battalions scouring the lowlands and mountains for large enemy units either unable or unwilling to confront the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne units. When a second offensive did not appear in June or July 1968 as predicted, most leaders and units in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne soon displayed remarkable initiative and creativity in developing techniques to execute pacification.

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's initial pacification efforts evolved because of rice denial operations and the command emphasis on working with and developing GVN forces. Although NVA and VC main force units withdrew to their sanctuaries and local force units broke into squad and smaller sized elements, officers throughout the division realized that "a sizeable and well organized VC infrastructure still operated" in the province that thwarted GVN political control and constituted a logistic and psychological support base for the communist armed forces.<sup>118</sup> With enemy contacts on the wane, the division concentrated on stopping the essential flow of rice from the lowlands to the sanctuaries. Or, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade after action report stated, "by 3 June, the remaining NVA managed to slip out of the [area of operations] and into the mountains, leaving behind the VC units and the guerrillas.... Accordingly, the 2d Brigade adjusted its modus operandi by conducting daily combined operations with RF/PF forces."<sup>119</sup>

Rice denial operations, as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's orders termed them, essentially changed the object of the division's endless RIF patrols from contact with enemy forces to locating enemy rice caches and VC rice taxation and transport parties. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's after action review summarized, "Brigade units conducted daily sweeps within the respective AO's, searching suspected locations for enemy rice caches.... At the

118. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969, dated 19 April 1969," p. 6.

119. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "AAR: Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 Feb 1969, dated 5 March 1969," p. 7, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

same time the presence of the units throughout the rice producing lowlands served as a protection for the local villages, thus preventing VC from levying taxes to be paid with harvested rice.”<sup>120</sup> Units confiscated large caches of rice that did not belong to villagers for redistribution by the provincial government, or alternately secured those stores of rice that did belong to the village and coordinated for their transport to centralized GVN storage facilities. Initially, units conducted operations narrowly directed against the enemy and his logistics, population security coming as a by-product and not an objective of the constant daytime patrolling and nighttime ambushes. For example, in the initial phases of Nevada Eagle, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade intelligence section did not care as much about the nature of the VC Infrastructure in its area of operations as it did such questions as “where and how does the enemy obtain rice? What are his routes into and out of the rice producing and storage areas? Does he purchase the rice, take it by force, or both? Where does he store the rice he obtains?”<sup>121</sup>

While rice denial operations indirectly attacked the VC Infrastructure, they led directly to two important developments that later opened the door to actions more directly contributing to pacification. Firstly, the constant small-unit saturation patrolling kept the VC or NVA from organizing any unit larger than a squad and essentially separated the communist political organization remaining in the lowlands from the military forces withdrawn to the sanctuaries. Although the VC infrastructure retained some control through terror tactics and for the time being kept the ability to elude the still-ineffective intelligence organs of the U.S. forces and GVN, they clearly stood on the defensive and unable to provide material support for sustained military action. Secondly, as one U.S. battalion commander recalled, U.S. and South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units “developed close working relationships during this combat against main

120. Ibid.,

121. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “OPORD 10-68; Operation Nevada Eagle, dated 19 May 68,” p. 5, Box 1, Operations Planning Files, Assistant Chief of Staff S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

force units” and the rice denial operations extended this working relationship to the fledgling Regional Forces (RF) companies and Popular Forces (PF) platoons.<sup>122</sup>

Working with South Vietnamese forces contributed significantly to prospects for pacification and became the fundamental objective of the new division commander, Major General Melvin Zais, who took over from Major General Olinto Barsanti in July 1968. Within a week of taking command, one of Zais’ first directives concerned the integration of all forces available to fight the enemy. His “fundamentals” of division operations included the co-location of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne battalion command posts with corresponding district headquarters and the integration of U.S. advisors into the tactical command group in order to gain his knowledge of the enemy, the terrain, and the friendly capabilities. Furthermore, Zais stressed the integration of RF companies with U.S. battalions and acknowledged that “although it is frequently necessary for the US commander to have to provide the spark to ignite the successful joint operation, RF – PF personnel should receive the same consideration as US personnel.”<sup>123</sup>

The Regional and Popular Forces would play a vital role in the upcoming pacification campaign in Thua Thien province because, as one commander remarked, the RF and PF had “certain inherent skills and acquired knowledge which the US trooper [could] not duplicate.”<sup>124</sup> Notwithstanding the official line, more than a few U.S. officers and soldiers viewed the territorial forces (as the RF and PF were collectively known) as simply “not effective at all,” or worse due to their many conventional weaknesses in comparison to American rifle companies and platoons.<sup>125</sup> In conventional

122. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 11.

123. Melvin Zais, “Combat Note #23, RF – PF Joint Operations, dated 25 July 1968,” single page, Box 1, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

124. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” Attached document “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” pp. 3-4, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

125. Gerald Lord, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel John W. Hendrix,” p. 44, Box 17, Company Command In Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI.

terms, these assessments probably did not miss the mark. A 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne infantry company consisted of just over one hundred men, lavishly equipped, extravagantly supported, well-educated and professional, and only tied to the war in Vietnam for a year. In contrast, as a case study of one combined operation explained, “The individual RF/PF is a product of the village and hamlets of rural Vietnam.... Consequently, individual and unit discipline is not as highly developed as in a U.S. unit.” Tactically, “fire discipline is generally poor – the RF/PF reconnoiters by fire when and where the mood strikes him, his rucksack becomes a home for stray chickens, small pigs, rice, or other items he passes.” Finally, the case study highlighted perhaps the largest gulf between the aggressive one-year warriors from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and the soldier-civilians of the territorial forces usually fighting in their own hamlets, sometimes against their own neighbors. “He [the RF/PF] is not by nature and training a ‘hard charger’ who tenaciously presses to overcome all obstacles to the accomplishment of his mission.... Especially on initial combined operations, the size, firepower, and boisterousness of the average trooper inhibit RF/PF aggressiveness and incline him to let his U.S. partners lead the way.”<sup>126</sup>

Obviously, the most ideological and opportunistic villagers served in either the VC or sometimes rose through the ranks of the ARVN, leaving the territorial forces with a much weaker pool of potential leaders. As one U.S. company commander recalled, after some initial apprehension, he “began to look at [working with the RF/PF] as a very good experience. When they left us, they were a pretty good unit, and the biggest thing that [I was] working with was not the soldiers. It was the leadership. The soldiers would do anything that their leadership would tell them to do. And the problem was that their leadership was not that strong.”<sup>127</sup>

Allowing for these constraints, the RF and PF did offer some capabilities sorely needed by U.S. forces operating in the lowland villages. When operating in vicinity of

126. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” pp. 3-4.

127. Linwood Burner, “Interview with Colonel Henry A. Kievenaar,” p. 16, Box 20, Company Command In Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI.



their native villages, the territorials gave integrated U.S. forces an improved understanding of the geography of the region equal to the VC. Most importantly, though, “they are intimately acquainted with the people and their patterns of activity,” a skill that became increasingly just as valuable as the vaunted firepower, mobility, and aggressiveness of the American infantry companies when combating the VC Infrastructure (VCI) and retaining control of areas cleared of communist local force units.<sup>128</sup> In fact, the after action review of the 101<sup>st</sup>’s first successful pacification campaign in Thua Thien found “a key component in digging out these locally based, deep-rooted, and elusive VC elements, and in establishing a permanent GVN presence to deter their return, was the effective utilization and exploitation of the potential of the RF/PF in all operations.”<sup>129</sup>

**“The most bitter and difficult stage we ever had”:**

**Pacification Begins in Quang Dien District**

Quang Dien district, located immediately to the north and west of Hue, harbored a VC Infrastructure that in late summer 1968, U.S. officers assessed as “solidly entrenched with key district personnel having operated against the French and GVN since 1945.”<sup>130</sup> Although the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry killed and captured over five hundred NVA in a cordon there in late April, the U.S. and GVN still had a long way to go to gain control of an area in which the communists controlled over 95 percent of the district following in the Tet offensive.<sup>131</sup> However, when the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry located their headquarters with the district headquarters in May 1968, Quang Dien district became the test bed for long-term, combined pacification operations in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division.

128. Hq. 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” pp. 3-4

129. Ibid., p. 2.

130. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

131. Ibid., p. 2.

Initially, VC strong resistance in the district kept the U.S. and RF/PF forces in their long-standing relationship of Vietnamese dependency. Territorial forces could not be trusted to stand up to determined VC attacks or aggressively pursue smaller bands of insurgents. In June 1968, the U.S. district advisor reported that “ARVN/US combined forces have had almost daily, but light contact w/ VC elements of platoon size and smaller... [and] the only day and night GVN controlled areas are the villages and hamlets physically occupied by GVN troops.”<sup>132</sup> In this environment, the territorial forces usually spent their nights defending their garrisons and their days integrated as squads within American infantry companies conducting reconnaissance missions. The daytime missions occasionally turned up caches and found booby traps, but kept up pressure on the VC attempting to retain control of Quang Dien and slowly built confidence and capability in the RF and PF.

At night, the territorial forces defended their villages while the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry (an infantry battalion with four rifle companies and a reconnaissance platoon) conducted between thirty and sixty ambushes a night along infiltration routes. Over time, numerous squad (eight man) and fire team (four man) night ambushes employed by the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> became the staple small unit action of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s pacification operations in the lowlands. When the communists proved unable to field units large enough to overwhelm, or savvy enough to evade these small ambush parties, they gradually lost the ability to support, communicate, and draw supplies from the VCI in the villages. Even though at this stage the Americans lacked detailed intelligence on the VCI in Quang Dien, the saturation ambushes produced results because “District Committees are the action level of the VCI, where broad directives are formed into plans

132. Robert Selzer, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Quang Dien District Report, dated 27 June 1968,” p.1, Monthly Province Reports, July to December 1968, Box 14, Monthly Province Reports, Advisory Team 18, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. All province and district reports from the Advisory Team 18 are hereafter referred to by their location and date of report. All Advisory Team 18 reports are located in Box 14 and referred to as Advisory Team 18 Collection.

of action for implementation, and hence are the most critical level of the infrastructure organization. The requirement for frequent contacts with the populace into the lowlands makes the district level cadre vulnerable to neutralization.”<sup>133</sup> When most of the civilian population adhered to curfew, or simply followed the rural norm of staying in their villages at night, the all-important VC cadre (men or women) became a much more easily identifiable target as they traversed the district at night.

As these operations increased RF/PF proficiency and decreased VC capabilities, the territorial forces took on more responsibility for securing their district. At first, the Vietnamese conducted strictly combined operations with U.S. forces, but integrated at the platoon and company levels instead of the squad and individual level as their leaders gained competence and confidence. Later, operational restrictions thrust small RF/PF forces into a more offensive role, since each 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division infantry battalion normally received only one UH-1 logistics re-supply helicopter per day. Each of these helicopters could usually carry only six of the heavier U.S. soldiers, but up to ten smaller Vietnamese soldiers and as one officer recalled “greater surprise could normally be achieved when that force made the combat assault...[and] an officer from the district advisory detachment with a radio ... remained with them throughout the operation.”<sup>134</sup> In a reversal from previous experience, the Vietnamese units made the helicopter assault and sweep while the American infantry waited in blocking positions.

The American and Vietnamese staffs also integrated at a low level throughout the operation. The 1-502<sup>nd</sup> commander located his headquarters with the district headquarters and his staff (to include the U.S. advisory team), a move which initially produced practical results in shorter planning cycles and better integration, but after several months of close and informal contact resulted in “the staffs [seeming] to be members of the same group and US and RF/PF forces [coming] to be regarded as a

133. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “OPORD 4-69, (Randolph Glen), dated 7 December 69,” p. B-1-2, Box 1, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

134. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” p. 9.

single force.”<sup>135</sup> Importantly, the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> viewed the Vietnamese as equal and not junior partners, with important implications for the usual command arrangement at the battalion level. Operations were planned nightly by a group that included the U.S. battalion commander, South Vietnamese district chief, the U.S. advisor, and their staffs. Although the Americans had the best planning capabilities and resources for execution against armed threats, the district chief had a much better understanding of the political situation and requirements, which proved increasingly important as the fight turned to operations against the VCI. Eventually, this exposure enabled the district staff to develop similar competence and confidence as their units in the field.

A captured VC document revealed that the enemy detected a change in tactics as well: “We used to say that they go sweeping ... [but] it has never been like this that the US troops are very patient in searching underground bunkers ...[and] this has caused many casualties for us and also many ralliers [to the GVN]. Most of the village military action cadres have been killed.” The letter went on to describe the problems that the constant saturation patrolling caused in communicating with various village cadres. “We could not go into the hamlet to get in touch with our men because the enemy has a very effective control and checking system. If we ask our men to go out of the hamlet to a certain location to meet us, they would be afraid and scared to come out.” The VC cadre further elaborated, “Most of the village military action cadres have been killed and no one is left to carry out the military action program. Even if there were some left, it would do no good now.” The author concluded that “this is the most bitter, and difficult stage we ever had in Quang Dien.”<sup>136</sup>

Indeed, at the time that this document’s author was killed in an ambush on 12 October 1968, the U.S. strength in Quang Dien district consisted of one platoon and, as the case study concludes “a major goal was achieved: although airborne forces were nearby and available if needed, security throughout the district was provided by the

135. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

136. Hq. 101st Airborne Division, “Captured VC Letter, dated 5 September 1968; captured 12 October 1968,” pp. 1-4, attached to “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign.”

RF/PF – who the people knew would remain permanently and would not be deployed to another area.”<sup>137</sup> The next month’s district advisor report revealed continued momentum in Quang Dien with no VC-initiated incidents for the month and a measured increase in villager confidence in the GVN after the elimination of a key VC cadre. While the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry’s platoons conducted operations outside the district, twenty-four independent RF/PF operations resulted in thirteen VC killed, eleven captured, and no friendly casualties.<sup>138</sup>

**“An analysis of past operations”:**

**A Breakthrough in Vinh Loc District**

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division began the unnamed operation in Quang Dien in May 1968, but did not undertake another major, dedicated pacification mission until 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry led the recapture of Vinh Loc on 10 September 1968. Between those two events, “the [101<sup>st</sup> Airborne] Division continued to operate with the major portion of two brigades operating in the populated coastal plains, and one brigade conducting operations in the mountainous jungle area, searching out and destroying enemy base and staging areas.”<sup>139</sup>

Between May and September 1968, the five to seven 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division infantry battalions operating in the lowlands conducted several short-duration, one- and two-day cordon operations normally directed against reported and suspected VC forces occupying villages. These actions superficially resembled the combined 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry/territorial forces operations in Quang Dien, but they lacked the permanence and familiarity that proved essential to success in Quang Dien. U.S. units hastily combined with unfamiliar ARVN, RF/PF, and NPF units for successful, though not lasting operations. American and ARVN units remained constantly on the move, stamping out

137. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” p. 11.

138. Lawrence Ewing, “Quang Dien District Report, November 1968, dated 30 November 1968,” single page, Monthly Province Reports, July to December 1968.

139. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 13.

organized VC resistance, while RF and PF units lacked the numbers and competence to retain control of newly-secured territory. As the writers of the Quang Dien case study duly acknowledged, “it is realized that the particular set of fortuitous conditions which existed and were exploited in Quang Dien District may not all pertain in other districts.”<sup>140</sup> Still, these operations were not ultimately futile as the VC remained off-balance and regrouping during the summer. More importantly, though, during these “numerous small scale operations ... the vital techniques of coordinating the efforts of all cooperating elements were refined.”<sup>141</sup>

When the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s tactical boundary moved east on 3 September 1968 to take over all of the Vinh Loc district formerly patrolled by U.S. Marines, a new opportunity emerged for employing a new pacification technique. “For years Vinh Loc district had been a base of support for the Viet Cong and the infrastructure was firmly entrenched and very influential,” as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s account of the operation stated.<sup>142</sup> The U.S. command long recognized the twenty-five kilometer long, three kilometer wide island east of Hue as a sanctuary for VC main forces fleeing from Hue. In fact, when the VC moved in during June and July, nearly half of the island’s 50,000 residents fled. A Marine battalion sent to clear the island in response met no resistance in a three-day operation in early August. Later, this same estimated VC battalion fought three RF companies to a standstill in early September, forcing the territorial forces to take refuge in their fortified compounds and call for American gunship support.<sup>143</sup>

The “soft cordon” evolved as another effective pacification technique. The particular set of geographic and enemy circumstances in Vinh Loc gave the 101<sup>st</sup>

140. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign,” p. 1.

141. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” p. 2, Miscellaneous Units, After Action Reports; MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

142. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” p. 5.

143. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” p. 3.

Airborne Division a chance to use a large-scale, combined, long-duration “soft cordon” for the first time and, at the province chief’s instance, Vinh Loc became the first significant test.<sup>144</sup> The “soft cordon” differed from earlier cordons in that destruction of trapped VC by firepower was not the primary objective of the encircling force. Instead, as an official description explained, “in [soft cordon operations] emphasis was placed on coordination with and use of GVN forces, surprise, isolation of the battlefield, minimum destruction of civilian property by preparatory fires, and population control.”<sup>145</sup> Such restraints on the employment of firepower as the first and last answers to all tactical problems percolated throughout the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division since the start of Nevada Eagle, but by the time of Vinh Loc in September 1968 they appeared to be more practice than mere official policy laid out in memorandums.<sup>146</sup>

When preparing for the operation, the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jim I. Hunt recalled that combined American and Vietnamese planning ruled the day and that “there were no definite lines of command established with a U.S. commander having authority over the Republic’s forces or vice versa.”<sup>147</sup> Thus, “the plan to cordon the area, conduct a sweep, and then return over the same area conducting a deliberate search, came out of detailed planning by the Province Chief, District Chief, ARVN Commanders, and the Commanders of the Division units participating in the operation.”<sup>148</sup> Ultimately, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade commander oversaw this combined operation, and his staff consisted of the deputy province chief, Vinh Loc district chief, U.S. deputy district advisor, and the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry battalion commander. The initial assault force

144. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 24.

145. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969; dated 19 April 1969,” p. 17.

146. Olinto Barsanti, “Combat Note #10, Combat in Populated Areas, dated 30 May 1968,” single page, Box 1, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II. “To insure that tactical victories are not tempered by propaganda losses I desire that all commanders instruct subordinate leaders on the restraints which pertain to combat in populated areas and insure that the reasons for these restraints are fully understood.”

147. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” p. 2.

148. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 24.

consisted of the U.S. infantry battalion, a reinforced ARVN infantry battalion, two RF companies, a PF platoon attached to every infantry company, and one hundred NPF split evenly between the ARVN and 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry companies. At the same time, two ARVN battalions of the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment established blocking positions on the mainland opposite Vinh Loc Island and a combined U.S./South Vietnamese Navy riverine patrol group established a floating cordon around the island.<sup>149</sup>

As Lieutenant Colonel Hunt pointed out, “An analysis of past operations showed the need for an operation of long duration using all available GVN resources if we were to be successful in rooting out the VC infrastructure.”<sup>150</sup> The plan called for further cooperation between U.S. forces, territorial forces, and GVN para-military units. Therefore, each U.S. rifle company contained at least one PF platoon and fifteen NPF and the 1-501<sup>st</sup> commander believed placing South Vietnamese personnel “with the vanguard of all units ... [ultimately] eliminated misunderstandings with detained persons.”<sup>151</sup> Planning for population security and intelligence screening occupied more planning detail than the scheme of maneuver, because all involved recognized the requirement “to insure that they [the people of Vinh Loc] were treated in such a way to win their support for the GVN.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, the plan called for close integration of the offensive combat forces of the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry and ARVN 54<sup>th</sup> regiment with the RF and PF who would assume responsibility for occupying the secured areas.

On 10 September 1968, the assault forces swept across the island with some resistance, but the VC mostly attempted to evade and blend in with the local populace. Even though the operation ultimately killed 154 enemy, captured 370 more (116 of whom were later assessed as VCI and not soldiers) with 176 weapons, resulted in 56 VC ralliers to the GVN, and netted 58 civilian detainees, the cost to the GVN forces, 1-501<sup>st</sup>

149. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” attached document “Combat After Action Report, Operation Vinh Loc, dated 3 October 1968,” pp. 1-2.

150. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 24.

151. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Vinh Loc, dated 3 October 1968,” p. 5.

152. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 25.



Infantry, and citizens of Vinh Loc were comparatively light. The assaulting forces used only two indirect fire missions during the ten-day operation, destroying three unoccupied huts, and all told the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry sustained two wounded, the 54<sup>th</sup> ARVN two killed and seven wounded, and the citizens of Vinh Loc two wounded.<sup>153</sup>

To obtain these results, the Vinh Loc task force used a combination of the same daytime RIF patrols and nighttime saturation ambushes that proved successful in Quang Dien with a new twist that proved especially effective in Vinh Loc due to the fact that most VC operating in the area did not come from the district. American and Vietnamese forces destroyed those forces which resisted and detained every military age male found on the island in those villages where the enemy did not resist. By increasing the capability to screen and interrogate detainees in the field and by U.S. and GVN officers in the Combined Intelligence Center located in the rear, the Vinh Loc operation produced results much more rapidly than in Quang Dien.

Specifically, the screeners and interrogators sought to separate the VC soldiers from the civilians. Those classified as soldiers then went through prisoner of war channels after interrogation. With the aid of village and hamlet chiefs, intelligence officers and police agents separated innocent civilians – who then moved through district channels to secured areas – from common criminals and VCI identified from blacklists who then entered the provincial detention and justice systems.<sup>154</sup> Importantly, the planners anticipated the mass of detainees and developed workable and innovative plans to handle them. For example, taking advantage of a demoralized and disorganized enemy, the district intelligence officer instructed the first of approximately 200 VC prisoners of war flown to the Combined Intelligence Center to segregate themselves according to unit – commanding in a loud voice for the K4B battalion to move here, the

153. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” 8.

154. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 25.

C117 company there, and the C118 company another place – which surprisingly almost half of them did, with the other half quickly identified by their comrades.<sup>155</sup>

After 20 September 1968, one ARVN battalion and D Company of the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry remained to secure the island while the RF companies trained with them to secure Vinh Loc on their own. During October 1968, the district advisor reported VC activity at “zero” and subsequently the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry company redeployed along with all but one of the 54<sup>th</sup> ARVN’s companies.<sup>156</sup> By November 1968, the security of Vinh Loc island rested entirely with two RF companies and eleven PF platoons and thirteen thousand of the Vinh Loc’s refugees returned.<sup>157</sup> The increased capabilities to protect the population demonstrated on Vinh Loc eventually resulted in a greater flow of actionable intelligence to the increasingly-capable territorial forces and bore out the early success of the operation indicated by the 10-20 September 1968 VC prisoner and killed tallies. As Lieutenant Colonel Hunt explained in his account of the operation, “as of the first of March 1969, there had been only one reported VC incident in Vinh Loc District since the [September 1968] operation. Seven VC infiltrated into a village under the cover of darkness. Their presence was immediately reported to the District Chief by members of the village. Elements of a Regional Force company conducted an assault the following morning and captured all seven.”<sup>158</sup>

**“Yet he seems to be able to bounce back very quickly”:**

#### **The Four Pacifications of Phu Vang**

Following the success of the Vinh Loc operation, Major General Zais wanted to apply the developing pacification tactics to other locations and immediately turned 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s attention to the most troublesome enemy area in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s sector, a

155. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, “Case Study; Operation Vinh Loc, 10-20 September 1968, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division,” p. 7.

156. Harold Cloutier, “MACCORDS Monthly Narrative Reports: Vinh Loc District Report, October 1968, undated,” p. 1, Monthly Province Reports, July to December 1968, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

157. Ibid., p. 2.

158. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” pp. 26-27.

twenty-eight square kilometer area of rice paddies and narrow villages strung out along numerous canals directly east of Hue located primarily within Phu Vang district.<sup>159</sup> Available intelligence indicated “the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI)... to be strong and deeply rooted in the area” as evidenced by the “numerous contacts with small groups of enemy, generally from two to five per group, throughout the area” over the preceding four months.<sup>160</sup> Practical experience with the enemy’s tenacity in Phu Vang came from a two-day soft cordon operation conducted in one village during early August 1968 by the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry that killed forty-three enemy and captured twenty more. In describing the stronger-than-expected enemy presence, the battalion commander remarked, “we didn’t anticipate the operation taking this long however, of course, we didn’t expect to get this many people.”<sup>161</sup>

Initially, the Phu Vang operation did not exactly duplicate the successes of the two earlier pacification actions. The Quang Dien operation ground on for six months with slow and steady progress while the Vinh Loc operation produced what turned out to be lasting results after a short, intense soft cordon operation. In contrast, the Phu Vang district provided the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division with more difficult terrain, a more tenacious enemy, and a complex force integration problem involving Vietnamese forces from three districts. Though ultimately successful, the four Phu Vang operations required to pacify the area showed progress in fits and starts and highlighted the importance of detailed para-military intelligence in regions with a stubborn VCI element

159. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang, dated 21 October 1968,” attached document “Memo: Operation Phu Vang I, dated 12 October 1968,” p. 1, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II. See Appendix A: Thua Thien District Map for location. Although all U.S. official records refer to this district as “Phu Vang,” some political maps – including Appendix A – refer to the same district as “Hoa Vang.” This district was eliminated as a political division after the communist victory in 1975.

160. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang, dated 21 October 1968,” p. 5.

161. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Interview, An Truyen Operation, dated 26 September 1968,” pp. 2-4, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

in addition to the now-accepted requirement for local forces to assume security of cleared areas.

Phu Vang I lasted from 27 September 1968 until 10 October 1968 and involved the same 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry battalion just involved with the successful cordon operation on Vinh Loc reinforced with an armored cavalry troop from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's division cavalry squadron.<sup>162</sup> GVN forces involved included five RF companies from three districts and eight PF platoons (along with one attached Marine Corps CAP team) which operated with U.S. forces and one ARVN infantry battalion as part of the cordon. A battalion from the 54<sup>th</sup> ARVN Infantry and squadron from the 7<sup>th</sup> ARVN Cavalry conducted the assault and search. A U.S. Navy riverine patrol group, Provincial Reconnaissance Units, Census Grievance personnel, and one NPF company also assisted the operation.<sup>163</sup> A simple scheme of maneuver resulted in a U-shaped cordon with the open end facing west and the ARVN forces moving from west to east through the pocket.

During Phu Vang I, the enemy attempted to evade detection and capture at almost every instance and fought only when necessary to escape the cordon. The intelligence summary of the action concluded, "Many of the enemy hid, submerged in the numerous canals and inundated rice paddies, breathing through bamboo reeds. At night they would attempt to exfiltrate and would be killed, captured, or driven back into the cordon by the Combined Forces. They would spend the nights in the villages within the cordon, and the next day move back into their hiding places or attempt to blend in with the farmers in the area...."<sup>164</sup> Within the cordoned area, the ARVN units employed the same daytime search patrols and nighttime saturation ambushes proven successful during previous operations and accounted for the majority of the eighty-six enemy killed, 168 enemy and 152 weapons captured, and forty-two ralliers to the GVN

162. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's 2-17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry did not convert from an armored cavalry squadron to an air cavalry squadron until the spring of 1969.

163. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang, dated 21 October 1968," pp. 1-2.

164. Ibid., Enclosure 3 (Intelligence).

produced during the operation. To accomplish these results, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne suffered nine wounded while their South Vietnamese allies sustained ten wounded and one killed.<sup>165</sup>

Although the units involved in Phu Vang I employed the same field interrogation and intelligence gathering techniques that succeeded in the Vinh Loc operation, they did not produce similarly decisive results. During the operation, the American and South Vietnamese forces detained over five hundred military-aged males and employed Census Grievance Cadre teams native to the region with the ARVN sweep elements to aid in the initial screening of detained persons.<sup>166</sup> Still, these methods did not break the insurgency in Phu Vang most likely because, unlike on Vinh Loc, many of the VC in Phu Vang did not stand out to the NPFF and Census Grievance Cadre as outsiders. Although these and other locals likely knew most of the VC cadre in their areas, they also likely still doubted the GVN's ability to protect them once Phu Vang I terminated and therefore many of the enemy remained undetected until Phu Vang III or IV (there is no record of a Phu Vang II ever being conducted). A report prepared for General Zais concluded that "the population was not sympathetic to the enemy cause, but supported him because of coercion and the threat of reprisals ... [and] were reluctant or refused to provide information and assistance to the forces of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam."<sup>167</sup> Whatever their ideological motives, at this time the villagers certainly did not see supporting the GVN with potentially life-endangering information as in their practical interests.

In the weeks following Phu Vang I, an increase of enemy sightings and agent reports indicated that the VC remained in the region and appeared to be gaining momentum in resurrecting their ranks despite the measures taken in the initial operation. Consequently, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade launched a very similar soft cordon operation from 25

165. Ibid., p. 8.

166. Ibid., attached document, "Memo: Operation Phu Vang I, dated 12 October 1968," pp. 2-6.

167. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang, dated 21 October 1968," attached document, "Case Study: Operation Phu Vang, prepared by Major Emmett Kelly," p. 1.

October to 6 November 1968 over the same area as before. Phu Vang III involved the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry battalion along with the entire ARVN 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, seven RF companies and five PF platoons, and the now-ubiquitous NPPF, Census Greivance, and PRU support. The initial scheme of maneuver changed slightly in hopes of surprising the enemy to be encircled. Once in place the American and GVN forces employed the same search, screen, and ambush tactics now prevalent in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's operations in the lowlands.<sup>168</sup> Despite the apparent similarity, Phu Vang III did include several revisions adapted from lessons learned in the previous operation. Most importantly, after years of atrophy, the RF and PF began to show signs of strain in their continuous operations after their apparent re-discovery following Tet 1968. Forces designed and recruited as local defense forces spent much of the summer on continuous sweeps, searches, and ambushes resulting in one officer's observation that "...sector forces are not as flexible as US forces, sector forces are in great demand in out area ... and finally after about 8-10 days they seem to lose their interest and effectiveness."<sup>169</sup> Indeed, some officers thought that the lack of adequate territorial forces to secure the area after Phu Vang I resulted in the rapid reconstitution of the enemy in the region.<sup>170</sup>

In addition to an easier load for the RF and PF, Phu Vang III featured the first large-scale integration of the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) into 101<sup>st</sup> operations. The PRU specialized in identifying and attacking the VCI and in the spectrum of anti-infrastructure organizations operated somewhere between the more restrained and bureaucratic NPPF and the limited oversight and accountability of the Phung Hoang (also known as the Phoenix Program). Whereas the NPPF operated

168. Hq., 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang III, (Operation Nevada Eagle), dated 22 November 1968," pp. 1-2, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2d Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

169. Hq., 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang, 21 October 1968," pp. 8-9.

170. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang III, (Operation Nevada Eagle), dated 22 November 1968," p. 8.

normally in squads and platoons, the PRU operated in pairs and small teams to collect and act on intelligence while the NPF focused on police work. During Phu Vang III, U.S. commanders found that “Low Level agent reports on the battalion area of operation were at best 35% reliable” but that “the use of two-man PRU ground reconnaissance teams proved effective as an intelligence watch” and “provided excellent intelligence on the target area.”<sup>171</sup> Additionally, the small PRU teams retained the capability to act rapidly on this intelligence themselves and on one occasion used information gained from a prisoner of war to kill the Vice Chairman of Phu Vang’s communist party and capture three of his aides.<sup>172</sup>

The pattern of events in Phu Vang III closely followed those of Phu Vang I. Units conducted daytime sweeps and night ambushes ultimately accounting for fifty enemy killed, sixty-seven captured, four ralliers, and sixty weapons captured at a cost of one American and four South Vietnamese killed. Just in the last operation, the enemy attempted to evade capture rather than fight and were “found in the numerous canals and inundated rice paddies, breathing through straws or bamboo reeds.” Also mirroring the last operation, “the enemy personnel would spend the nights in the villages within the cordon, and the next day move back into their hiding places” becoming easy targets for ambush patrols.<sup>173</sup> In this case, search forces detained just under two hundred military age males in Phu Vang III and the 1-501<sup>st</sup> battalion commander noted that “there was a sharp decrease in the number of [booby traps] and mines encountered in the area following the first operation.”<sup>174</sup>

Despite the observation that “the enemy was completely disorganized, confused, and lacked leadership” during Phu Vang III, the pattern of sightings and reports indicated

171. Hq., 1-501 Infantry, “1-501 Infantry Combat Operations After Action Report, dated 1 March 1969,” Inclosure 1 (Intelligence), p. 5, Box 5, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

172. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang III, (Operation Nevada Eagle), dated 22 November 1968,” p. 5.

173. Ibid., Enclosure 3 (Intelligence), p. 1.

174. Ibid.

yet another resurgence in the Phu Vang area and in December 1968, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne conducted Phu Vang IV from 11 December 1968 to 4 January 1969.<sup>175</sup> During interrogations in Phu Vang III, intelligence officers learned that “insurgents believed that areas in which US forces operate and depart, are relatively safe for a prolonged period after their departure” and apparently after Phu Vang III, the enemy believed that the two previous operations conducted within weeks of each other gave them sufficient breathing room to reconstitute.<sup>176</sup> After three months of campaigning, during operation Phu Vang IV the VC finally showed signs of breaking in Phu Vang district.

In contrast to the previous two Phu Vang operations, the enemy found during Phu Vang IV showed little inclination to seriously evade capture and little fighting spirit until cornered in their bunkers. With an ever-decreasing population to blend in with and growing mistrust of those who did remain, the VC abandoned their earlier practice of attempting to blend in with the population and instead remained on the fringes of abandoned and destroyed hamlets and did not attempt to hide their weapons. Apparently, the daytime patrol, nighttime ambush technique finally forced a change in VC tactics in the district. “In direct contrast with operation Phu Vang III,” the after action report submitted for Phu Vang IV declared, “enemy personnel would not spend the nights in the villages and the next day move back to their hiding places.” Utterly demoralized and unable to either blend in with the population, hide, or mass for effective resistance, the VC either fought to their deaths in small groups from bunkers or surrendered and rapidly turned over the names and location of their comrades. “Contacts were frequent with body counts and IWC [Individual Weapons Captured] counts rising steadily throughout the operation,” the after action report summarized. While at the same time, those VCI taken prisoner often “revealed the names of other VCI in the [area of operations], plus the locations of many new bunkers,” creating new

175. Ibid., p. 3-2.

176. Ibid., p. 8.



leads and targets for the seventy-six Provincial Reconnaissance Unit men assigned to Phu Vang IV.<sup>177</sup>

In the end, the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry battalion, 54<sup>th</sup> ARVN Infantry regiment, two RF companies and two PF platoons accounted for seventy-five VC killed, ninety-nine captured, one rallier, and sixty weapons at a cost of two killed and seven wounded. Over the course of the three Phu Vang operations, the number of people living in the Phu Vang district steadily decreased during the period from Phu Vang I through Phu Vang III as they fled VC retribution and constant searches from U.S. and GVN forces. Even though the enemy had been “denied the use of 297 of his personnel” over the previous three months the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s leadership remained much more sanguine about their ability to stomp out the insurgency quickly with novel tactics. “After Phu Vang III, it was believed that the VCI could not regain the momentum needed to support any offensive within this area,” the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry’s commander declared at the end of Phu Vang IV, “yet he seems to be able to bounce back very quickly. His ability to recruit VCI, and people to fill the ranks of [Local Force] VC units cannot be treated lightly. Constant and unyielding pressure must be placed continuously upon the enemy if we are to completely root out the VC Infrastructure.”<sup>178</sup> The Phu Vang experience demonstrated that pacification would usually require more than a single innovative application of available forces to break the insurgents. In more difficult areas, the as the 101<sup>st</sup> learned for the first time in the Phu Vang district, lasting pacification could not be achieved quickly or with an economy of forces.

**“On paper, it seems simple”:**

**An Assessment of Operation Nevada Eagle**

Operation Nevada Eagle officially terminated on 28 February 1969 and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division began Operation Kentucky Jumper. The end of Nevada Eagle

177. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Phu Vang IV, dated 14 January,” pp. 2-4, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>d</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

coincided roughly with two other events outside the world of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division; the end of the three-month Accelerated Pacification Campaign on 1 February and the passing of Tet 1969 without major incident. On the ground, the battalions committed to Nevada Eagle noticed by early 1969 areas formerly requiring “Allied battalion and company sized operations, could now be covered by provincial forces supported by short range reconnaissance patrols and ambushes.”<sup>179</sup> In upcoming operations, these U.S. battalions would be committed in greater numbers to hunt for NVA and engage units in the mountains during the 1969 summer dry season. In the lowlands, no communist unit operated at larger than squad size, Hue remained free from VC attack, most other population centers fell under positive GVN control for the first time in over a year, and South Vietnamese territorial forces gained the capability to deal with the weakened VC for the first time ever. Most of this can be attributed to the practices developed over the course of Nevada Eagle. “There was a marked improvement in the civilian population’s willingness to cooperate and to assist, once the Division started using the soft cordon and saturation-type night ambushes,” claimed Lieutenant Colonel Hunt.<sup>180</sup>

The growing capabilities and close integration of the Vietnamese territorial forces and para-military organizations with 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne operations were similarly essential to the success of Nevada Eagle and their performance ultimately gave the people the confidence to provide information against the VC. Neither factor could progress far ahead of the other – Vietnamese civilian confidence in security and RF and PF effectiveness in providing it progressed together, yet this progress varied according to circumstance. Vinh Loc illustrated sudden and dramatic confidence-building, Quang Dien showed steady and constant progress, while Phu Vang ultimately became a test of endurance requiring constant assistance from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division.

179. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” p. 8, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

180. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 34.

For the companies and platoons actually marching out of their base camps every day to fight the pacification campaign, two techniques predominated – the soft cordon and the squad night saturation ambush. Both missions allowed the U.S. units to integrate with and develop the capabilities of South Vietnamese forces. At the same time, cordons and ambushes allowed units to generate and act on specific intelligence information. “On paper, it seems simple,” one 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry company commander with extensive experience in the lowlands remembered. In reality, though, this officer classified the cordon operation as the most difficult of all his combat experiences in Vietnam. Tactically, the cordon presented a nightmare of fire control with, in one particularly difficult example, “about six companies of people in a big circle at night and inside enemy units, firing out and us firing in, bullets going every which way.”<sup>181</sup> Any force of the same nationality and training level would find such an operation difficult, but 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division battalions and companies executed such operations while training ARVN, RF, and PF units alongside them, in front of them, and integrated within their own units with minimal casualties and a high degree of effectiveness. Learning on the job might not have been the safest route to creating an effective counter-insurgent force out of the RF and PF, but these initial actions integrated with U.S. units showed the territorials first-hand that their VC enemies could be beaten and were not invincible super-soldiers in black pajamas. Most importantly, the common experience of combat and successfully executing difficult operations together created the ingredient of trust between the South Vietnamese and Americans so often missing in previous joint efforts.

Carrying out these difficult operations built Vietnamese confidence in themselves and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division confidence in their Vietnamese allies. As one company commander later recalled, “I worked some in the delta with ARVN divisions and had not been impressed with them at all, but I thought that the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division was a super, super unit.”<sup>182</sup> “They fought very well with us,” remembered another of the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup>

181. Davis, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett,” p. V-12, MHI.

182. Lord, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel John W. Hendrix,” p. 45, MHI.

Division's 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, "they did a first rate job."<sup>183</sup> According to General Zais, the "rapport which developed between U.S. and Vietnamese commanders and staffs" was "one of the most significant factors which contributed to the successes achieved in Operation Nevada Eagle."<sup>184</sup>

District advisor monthly reports from the 1968-69 winter period highlight the change in nature of the campaign. Colonel Thomas Bowen, still the provincial senior advisor, declared almost euphorically on several occasions that the struggle in Thua Thien moved "from tanks to tractors and from artillery to agriculture" as "economic factors have replaced enemy forces as the main form of planning and action."<sup>185</sup> The December report declared glowingly that "the infamous 'Street Without Joy' area is now rightly titled, 'The Street with Some Joy,'" before finally declaring that "pacification in Thua Thien is not longer a distant objective but a reality."<sup>186</sup>

Though Colonel Bowen's reports tended to be more optimistic than his subordinate district advisors, even these officers could find little but progress to report. The district advisors for Vinh Loc, Quang Dien, and Phu Vang observed similar progress. The Phu Vang report for February 1969 claimed that the villagers enjoyed a freedom of movement and activity "which have not been possible for five years" and that the 417 independent operations conducted by RF and PF units in the district resulted

183. Davis, "Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett," p. V-22, MHI.

184. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Nevada Eagle, 17 May 1968 to 28 February 1969, dated 19 April 1969," Commander's Notes, P. 31, Box 22, After Action Reports, Headquarters, United States Army, Vietnam, Command Historian, Record Group 472, NARA II.

185. Thomas Bowen, "MACCORDS Monthly Province Reports: Thua Thien Province Report, November 1968, dated 3 December 1968," p. 1, Monthly Province Reports, July to December 1968, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

186. *Ibid.*, 2. The "Street Without Joy" was a common term for Route 1 between Hue and Quang Tri to the north. The area earned this name from French soldiers during their fight against the VC in the early 1950's due to the frequency of ambushes that occurred there and was later popularized by historian and journalist Bernard Fall's 1961 account of the French experience fighting the VC titled *Street Without Joy*.

in one VC killed and two captured.<sup>187</sup> The March report stated “the pacification of Phu Vang is almost complete with all areas safe to travel at day without weapons and secure enough at night to travel anywhere with minimum security.”<sup>188</sup> In Quang Dien, no VC-initiated incidents occurred in either February or March 1969.<sup>189</sup> Over the same period, the Vinh Loc district advisor reported three VC captured, one killed, and “pacification throughout the entire district [as] outstanding.”<sup>190</sup> By the end of March 1969, thirty-eight RF companies and forty-one PF platoons operated in Thua Thien province and so long as the protective shield of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division battalions kept the NVA in their sanctuaries, these territorial forces – the equivalent of more than a division of light infantry – consistently demonstrated the capability to keep the lowlands secure.<sup>191</sup>

The conclusion of Operation Nevada Eagle demonstrates an interesting contrast between the initial concept and the actual actions undertaken by the 101<sup>st</sup>'s nine infantry battalions over its nine month duration, pointing to the ad hoc and improvisational development of the effective pacification tactics. Importantly, these developments took place because of – and not in spite of – a division leadership that emphasized combined

187. William Shackelford, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Phu Vang District Report, February 1969, dated 28 February 1969,” single page, Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1969, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

188. Shackelford, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Phu Vang District Report, March 1969, dated 31 March 1969,” single page. Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1969, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

189. Robert Taggs, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Quang Dien District Report, February 1969, dated 28 February 1969,” see also Taggs, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Quang Dien District Report, February 1969, dated 28 February 1969,” Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1969, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

190. James Glazk, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Phu Vang District Report, March 1969, dated 28 February 1969,” see also Glazk, “MACCORDS Monthly District Narrative Reports: Phu Vang District Report, February 1969, dated 28 February 1969,” Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1969, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

191. Bowen, “MACCORDS Monthly Province Reports: Thua Thien Province Report, March 1969, dated 3 April 1969,” p. 5, Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1969, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

operations with all types of Vietnamese forces in addition to the more traditional American emphasis on finding and engaging large enemy units. For three years from 1968 through 1971, the primary mission in every 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division-level operation order remained the detection and destruction of NVA and VC main force units. Yet, when these opportunities did not present themselves, as during Nevada Eagle, the leadership and infantry units of the 101<sup>st</sup> remained flexible in their approach to combating the enemy and found effective methods to attack the insurgents and their infrastructure.

**“They searched men’s minds:”**

**Pursuit of VCI in the Summer of 1969**

For all of their success driving organized enemy units from the lowlands and bringing the most populated regions of Thua Thien under control, the soft cordon technique began to produce diminishing returns as VC ranks thinned. In this environment, multi-company cordon operations in the lowlands gave way increasingly to intelligence gathering, para-military operations against the VCI, and saturation ambushes by 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne infantry companies living in the villages. With life returning to a rare level of calm and quiet for most villages in Thua Thien, General Zais reminded his subordinates that they “must recognize that any cordon operation is an inconvenience for those innocent and loyal citizens living inside the cordon” and instructed them to take “positive measures” to alleviate the adverse impact of cordon operations” lest the people “become irritated and alienated.”<sup>192</sup>

South Vietnamese units and agencies led the summer-long fight against the VCI and many of the battalions committed recently to pacification operations in the lowlands necessarily changed tactics to search for and do battle with larger NVA forces hiding in

192. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” attached document “Commanding General’s Civic Action/PSYOPS Support of Cordon Operations, dated 9 March 1969,” Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

the mountains. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division planned operations Kentucky Jumper (1 March – 14 August 1969) and Richland Square (15 August – 28 September 1969) to direct two-thirds of the division's infantry battalions against the five NVA regiments believed to be infiltrating into, or reorganizing within the mountainous western portion of Thua Thien.<sup>193</sup> These actions, overwhelmingly company-sized reconnaissance in force missions conducted in triple canopy jungle, normally found nothing and occasionally encountered small trail watching parties of NVA. On rare occasions, by contrast, as at the largest and most famous example on Dong Ap Bia (Hamburger Hill) in the A Shau Valley during May 1969, American units found substantial groups of NVA defending their base camps.<sup>194</sup> After months of light or no contact, 101<sup>st</sup> battalions exhibited extreme aggressiveness in piling on defending NVA main force units when they could be found and usually extracted a great toll on the enemy, but not always in the most efficient cost in American casualties. Though these NVA units represented the greatest threat to GVN sovereignty in the lowlands after the year-long smashing of the VC, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's operations against these forces merit attention in this study only in that they illustrate the flexibility required of all infantry battalions to be able to disperse and conduct pacification operations in the lowlands and then rapidly transition to conventional fire-and-maneuver battles with the NVA in the jungle highlands.

Although most of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's assets turned to engaging the NVA, at least three infantry battalions remained involved in pacifying the lowlands fighting against the insurgents and their infrastructure. "Terrorism was rampant," Captain David

193. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969," p. 9. The division intelligence estimate concluded "at this time [April '69] there are elements of five NVA regiments [4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup>] in our area of operations."

194. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division; Operational Reports – Lessons Learned; period ending 31 October, 1969," pp. 1-9, Box 2, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI. See Samuel Zaffiri, *Hamburger Hill* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988) for an in-depth account of the May 1969 fighting, past fights in the A Shau Valley, and implications of the last battle on U.S. politics and the Vietnamese battlefield.

Bramlett who commanded C company, 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry in the lowlands in early 1969 recalled, “they would just come in, drag a village official or a government sympathizer out and execute him.... There was that sort of intimidation through terrorism and taking the rice harvest.” After taking over the area from a U.S. Marine company, his company’s “job was to build confidence with the local population, isolate the population from the NVA, and our technique was ambush, ambush, ambush.”<sup>195</sup>

Captain Bramlett’s account of how his company accomplished this mission gives one example of the decisive impact of intelligence against the insurgent infrastructure. Initially, Bramlett’s company operated without significant intelligence from higher levels, but his battalion commander encouraged his subordinates to develop his own and sent the company commander a two-man PRU team to assist in the effort. “I didn’t know what PRU’s were but they were experts in intelligence,” Bramlett said in an interview fourteen years later, “they didn’t speak much English and through an interpreter, they told me that they searched men’s minds.”<sup>196</sup>

At one point, Bramlett’s C Company went three weeks without enemy contact until the PRU team brought in a woman who provided the name of an important local VC cadre member and a time and location of his link-up with other VC cadre. When one of his platoons and an attached PF element laid an ambush on the site, the seven cadre appeared within five minutes of the predicted time, within meters of the predicted place, and all died in the ambush. “An interesting thing happened in the village [after the ambush]” Bramlett remembered, “The villagers saw we were serious ... and [I] kept two platoons out ambushing and moving through out the villages.... From that point on, the villagers would tell me, they would come to tell me and tell me when the NVA were coming. It was the most incredible experience.”<sup>197</sup>

While developing and exploiting his growing intelligence network, Bramlett found “people very hostile to NVA. They were tolerant, if you will, of the VC. They

195. Richard Davis, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett,” p. V-25, MHI.

196. Ibid., pp. V-33 through V-39, MHI.

197. Ibid., pp. V-33 through V-39, MHI.



were their neighbors who had chosen to support the Viet Cong.” On the other hand, “the NVA they had no time for. Once they saw we had the capability to protect them and inflict casualties on the NVA, kill them, it was incredible.” Bramlett’s infantry company compiled an “incredible record of ambushes” because C Company “lived in the village [and] acted on every tip, even though in many cases, some cases it was a dry hole” in order to retain the villagers’ confidence. His advantage “was all intelligence” and allowed Captain Bramlett to retain the initiative against the enemy. “When you pull the ambush, you hold all the aces,” and he explained, “I rarely had to guess.” After several weeks, the company commander built a by-name list of all VC (but not NVA) in his area and used this list persuade family members to induce their surrender lest they get caught in one of his company’s ambushes.<sup>198</sup>

Of course, the PRU team provided the information that led to the initial VC cadre ambush and broke open C Company’s enviable operating environment. Most of the time, the information they gained did not come cheaply. “They were rough on prisoners,” Bramlett remembered of the PRU team. “They didn’t kill them but they pushed them around and, again, under U.S. control I couldn’t allow that to happen.” A 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division operations order defined the PRU’s mission simply as “the elimination by capture, if possible, or killing, if necessary, of the VCI.”<sup>199</sup> Bramlett agreed that “they were excellent at interrogation,” but he also added that “occasionally, when they worked with me, I had to reign their methods in.”<sup>200</sup>

C/2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s example of pacification certainly could be labeled unique in many ways. However, many units apparently replicated the same results throughout Thua Thien province during Operations Kentucky Jumper and Richland Square. In addition to village and hamlet elections held in March, the VC’s ability to impact the civil aspect of GVN pacification programs waned throughout the period from March

198. *Ibid.*, pp. V-33 through V-39, MHI.

199. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “OPORD 2-69, dated 10 Oct 69,” p. B-5-2, Box 1, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

200. Davis, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett,” pp. V-33 through V-39, MHI.

through October 1969.<sup>201</sup> From May through October 1969, the number of VC incidents recorded throughout the province steadily decreased from a high of 132 in May to a low of 33 in October.<sup>202</sup> By the end of October 1969, though, even the night saturation ambushes began to come up dry as VC action and movement became scarce in the lowlands. Despite the increasing weakness of the enemy in the lowlands, the new division commander, Major General John M. Wright, warned his subordinates not to become complacent. In a November 1969 directive he explained that the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division conducted 5591 separate ambushes in the preceding month apart from other friendly forces, of which only nineteen engaged enemy elements, resulting in twenty-six enemy killed and two captured.<sup>203</sup> During the winter 1969-1970 monsoon, most intelligence officers thought communist units currently reconstituting in their mountain sanctuaries needed to infiltrate back into the lowlands to obtain a share of the vital rice crop. General Wright intended to keep “the price of rice” high during the coming Operation Republic Square, but needed effective execution by his infantry companies to do so.<sup>204</sup>

201. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

202. See 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Operational Reports – Lessons Learned (ORLLs) from the following periods: period ending 31 July 1969, tables pp. 17-19; period ending 31 October 1969, tables pp. 17-20; and period ending 31 January 1970, tables pp. 19-20. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division classified VC incidents as Finance/Economic, Propaganda, Sabotage, Intelligence gathering, Kidnapping, Assassination, and Terror. The Monthly totals of all incidents are as follows: May- 132, June- 124, July- 92, August- 31, September- 63, October- 33, November- 28, and December- 45. The division did not track VC incidents in ORLLs reports before May 1969. All ORLLs found in Boxes 2 and 3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Operational Reports/Lessons Learned, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

203. John M. Wright, “Operational Notes #7, dated 10 November 1969,” p. 1, Box 2, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

204. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Republic Square, 29 September to 6 December 1969,” p. 6, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

## **“The Price of Rice”:**

### **Losing Momentum During Operation Republic Square**

Instead of returning to the lowlands in force for rice during the 1969-70 winter monsoon season, the communists did not repeat the same infiltrations that cost them so dearly over the previous year. Surveying the pattern of enemy activity from recent years, General Wright and his planners believed that the enemy would use cover that the monsoon season provided to move from their sanctuaries and re-gain a foothold in the lowlands in time for the rice harvest in March and April.<sup>205</sup> The low cloud cover and torrential rains hampered the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s ability to detect the enemy from the air, rapidly pile on reinforcements and firepower if elements found the enemy, and regularly re-supply isolated firebases and patrols in any circumstance. Taking into account these enemy intentions and their own limitations, the division launched Operation Republic Square beginning 29 September 1969 to pre-empt the enemy’s move.

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s mission for Republic Square was to “provide maximum protection for the populated lowlands of Thua Thien Province” and in a change from the previous six month’s operations, “conduct operations west of the piedmont only in reaction to hard intelligence indicating the presence of NVA/VC units.” In order to counter the enemy’s expected effort to re-energize the VC, the “primary emphasis was placed on providing maximum close-in security for the populated lowlands.”<sup>206</sup> Once again, the primary means of accomplishing this mission on the ground would be the now-proven tactics of the soft cordon, nighttime small-unit saturation ambushes, and combined operations with Vietnamese territorial forces.

In the Phu Thu district, 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry battalion conducted Operation Saturate to achieve the division’s objectives set out in Republic Square. Saturate was the 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s portion of the division’s plan “to establish a coordinated system of territorial

205. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “OPORD 2-69, dated 10 October 1969,” p. B-1-1.

206. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Republic Square, 29 September to 6 December 1969,” p. 2.

security; increase the level of hamlet security and development ... and deny resources to the enemy.”<sup>207</sup> Building on the successful model from the previous eighteen months, planners intended “that a company of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division will be committed to the general vicinity of the targeted hamlet.” Once there, “a 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division platoon will be rotated for combined internal defense operations with the regional forces, NPFF [and] PF ... as they became available” in addition to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne company’s own independent ambush and patrol actions. Drawing on the experiences from the last summer, these officers predicted 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne “forces will be gradually reduced as regional forces increase in proficiency and popular forces... become available and are trained.”<sup>208</sup>

At the beginning of Saturate, the battalion’s intelligence section estimated the enemy’s strength at fifty to seventy-five with a mix of “NVA, VC, Local Force VC, and VCI.”<sup>209</sup> Following an unsuccessful attack on the district headquarters in July 1969 that left seventeen of their comrades dead, the enemy in Phu Thu settled on a pattern of harassing attacks, propaganda, intimidation, and booby-trapping. During the day, these insurgents blended into local populace or hid in small bunkers and assembled at night in groups of four to eight men to conduct their harassing attacks or other actions. The initial operations order warned “though the enemy forces operating in Phu Thu District are small in number, they are not to be underestimated in their ability to conduct coordinated attacks and harassing actions on Allied units, outposts, and bases.”<sup>210</sup> Conducting these actions likely exposed most of these insurgents to identification by the local populace, yet throughout the eight weeks of Saturate, 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry could not gain enough of the villagers’ confidence or make in-roads against the insurgent

207. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, period ending 31 October 1969,” p. 77, Box 2, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

208. Ibid., p. 78.

209. Hq., 1-327 Infantry, “OPORD 3-69 (Saturate) dated 1 October 1969,” Annex B (Intelligence), Box 25, Operations Planning Files, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (S-3), 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

210. Ibid.

infrastructure to break the enemy in Phu Thu, to the detriment of pacification in the region.

At the conclusion of Saturate on 4 December 1969, 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry accounted for eight enemy killed and nine captured with no ralliers (out of an estimated fifty to seventy-five) at a cost of one U.S. soldier killed and thirty-one wounded. Though they worked with the local RF and PF units and “conducted saturation operations, to include daylight patrols and night ambushes of squad and fire team size,” 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry never operated with NPPF or PRU’s and similarly never gained an intelligence foothold in the villages they secured.<sup>211</sup> Unlike Captain Bramlett’s company, they always had to guess on ambush locations and the true identity of the villagers they encountered.

The record of the battalion’s operations indicates that their ambush elements identified and engaged the enemy based primarily upon their dress, location, and possession of a weapon. When the enemy chose to avoid wearing the black pajamas of the VC, or khaki and green uniforms of the NVA, did not carry a weapon, or followed normal civilian routines, they escaped detection in almost every case. Although the enemy initiated only five of the fifty-six contacts during the operation, without proper intelligence the aggressiveness of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne units could not prevent the VC from emplacing the mines and booby traps that inflicted most of the thirty-two American casualties.<sup>212</sup> At the end of Saturate, the 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry battalion commander asserted that “tight control over populated areas and likely routes of infiltration must be maintained if a future build up in enemy forces is to be prevented,” and concluded “this can be accomplished by a periodic census taking program at district level.”<sup>213</sup> Unless the census-takers learned to read men’s minds as the PRU, they were unlikely to expose the hardcore communist insurgents.

211. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report – Operation Republic Square (Saturate), dated 4 January 1970,” pp. 1-15, Box 27, After Action Reports, Command Historian, Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

212. Ibid.

213. Ibid., p. 4.

Throughout Thua Thien province during Republic Square, falling numbers of VC killed, captured, and rallied indicated that other 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division units appeared to similarly lose momentum. The lopsided communist-to-Allied loss ratios recorded during the summer became more even. The entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division accounted for thirty-three NVA and VC killed, two captured, and two ralliers during Republic Square, for a cost of six Americans killed and nineteen wounded.<sup>214</sup> A 2-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry soft cordon in late October 1969 detained one hundred eighteen persons, seven of whom turned out to be VC, while two similar late-November actions by the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry detained 735 people to capture seven more VC.<sup>215</sup> Overall, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne killed 254, captured sixteen, and induced three ralliers during Republic Square at a cost of sixteen Americans killed and eighty-six wounded.<sup>216</sup>

The loss of momentum for 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne operations did not indicate a loss of the tremendous gains in pacification made over the eighteen months from May 1968 to December 1969. The division's after action report for Republic Square commented that "contact in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade areas was extremely light throughout the period" and almost all monthly advisory team reports indicated continued progress of the civil pacification program by the GVN through December 1969.<sup>217</sup> Instead, the communists did not intend to – or simply could not – expose themselves again in the lowlands to rebuild the VC to pre-Tet offensive levels. General Wright's "Price of Rice" apparently was too high for the NVA and VC to try again and they shifted tactics instead. Most signs pointed to success in Thua Thien province, but the NVA remained an increasing menace and a hardened core of VC gave these NVA units the intelligence and political support to operate outside of their sanctuaries. Despite the increased attention devoted

214. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Republic Square, dated 18 December 1969," p. 5, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

215. *Ibid.*, p. 8 and 11.

216. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report, Operation Republic Square, 29 September to 6 December 1969," p. 12.

217. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat After Action Report – Operation Republic Square (Saturate), dated 4 January 1970," p. 3.

to the VC infrastructure in Operation Republic Square, effective tactics and sufficient effort only produced lasting results against this core of insurgents when supplemented by the vital ingredient of time. The dramatic pacification gains of 1968 and 1969 certainly reversed the communist insurgency in Thua Thien, but only a steady and imaginative effort by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and their Vietnamese allies could turn this opportunity into long-term stability and security.

**“A moment like this did not exist before”:  
Synthesis of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Pacification Efforts,  
May 1968 – December 1969**

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division evolved effective counter-insurgency practices in Thua Thien province following the communist Tet offensive in 1968. Generally five elements, in different amounts according to circumstances, proved essential to establishing security. Firstly, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division exhibited the will and capability to place a constant presence in the villages and hamlets to rival that exercised by the insurgents. Secondly, the division’s leadership mandated operations with, and training of, South Vietnamese forces for practical and political reasons to assist in exercising this presence. Third, when available, good intelligence allowed units to efficiently exercise the continuous presence in the villages without becoming onerous or counter-productive. Also, throughout these eighteen months, division personnel at all levels demonstrated an understanding of the political dimension of counterinsurgency, including the necessity to minimize damage when fighting the enemy and working through a muddled, often less efficient command arrangement. These four elements manifested themselves to varying degrees in two simple tactics at the company level – the nightly saturation ambushes and frequent soft cordon operations.

All these measures eventually built the villagers’ confidence that the U.S. and GVN security forces could protect them from the insurgents and that this version of security was better than that offered by the enemy. Gaining the confidence of the villagers produced a reciprocal effect in the effectiveness of the security forces and was

not a hollow or mere moral victory. Intelligence improved, territorial forces gained rapidly in confidence and respect, and combat more often than not gave way to police work in the cases where this important breakthrough occurred.

A fifth ingredient, the flexible organization of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's infantry battalions, enabled the division to match the enemy across the spectrum of operations from counter-insurgency to conventional battle. Often within days or weeks, the same infantry battalions that hunted individual VC cadre and provided security in the villages also conducted company reconnaissance in force missions to find NVA battalions and regiments in the jungle, or fought the conventional, firepower-intensive urban combat like that seen in the aftermath of Tet 1968. To paraphrase Captain Bramlett, on paper the techniques of successful counter-insurgency seem easy and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's experience argues against formations organized and trained specifically for such contingencies. "One of the biggest things you'll have to do is to limit the damage that you do at a particular level," one company commander recalled. "There are times when you have to put everything that you've got on a particular point in time. There are other times when you can do it with very light forces and accomplish the same thing. And you've got to monitor that, especially as a company commander."<sup>218</sup> The responsibility for deciding exactly what level of violence is required to accomplish the mission ultimately lay with good junior leadership and not organization or equipment of the unit. In this case, a good conventional combat leader performed just as well in counter-insurgency actions primarily because of this understanding.

Despite some tactical and province-level success, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division did not succeed in their overall counter-insurgency operations from May 1968 to December 1969 through "contacts by major forces or large-scale cordon operations," a division report summarized. Instead this success was won "by the less dramatic day-to-day

218. Linwood Burner, "Interview with Colonel Henry A. Kievenaar," p. 12.



execution of a harmonious and well-integrated US/Vietnamese campaign.”<sup>219</sup> After years of lost opportunities and foiled attempts, the U.S. and South Vietnam finally discovered a successful combination to fight the communist insurgency in Thua Thien province over the eighteen months from Nevada Eagle to Republic Square. Captured VC documents revealed that even their long-time cadre believed with the loss of much of their infrastructure to successful pacification techniques “that a moment like this did not exist before.”<sup>220</sup> Ultimately, the final moment belonged to the communists, but seven years after the fall of Saigon, at least one 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division company commander remained “convinced that if we’d had done more than that earlier it could have been different.” Further admonishing his own ignorance of population security from his first tour in Vietnam he commented, “I didn’t realize how easy it was to seal off populated areas. I would have never believed it... You didn’t have to put a gigantic cordon out. All you had to do was gamble occasionally and then react when people told you they were coming.”<sup>221</sup>

219. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Pacification of Quang Dien District: An Integrated Campaign” p. 1.

220. Hq. 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” pp. 6-7.

221. Davis, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel David Bramlett,” pp. V-41 through V-42.

## CHAPTER IV

### **“THE NAME OF THE GAME FOR THUA THIEN IS CLEARLY SURVIVAL”: A PACIFIED PROVINCE AT WAR, 1970 AND 1971**

In 1970 and 1971, as pacification in Thua Thien province moved from a time of establishment into one of consolidation, the fulcrum of the Vietnam War moved from a confrontation of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division infantrymen and home-grown insurgents to two diverging fights. In the lowlands, territorial forces proved more than a match for communist guerrilla cells and what remained of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) as they demonstrated decreasing need for American support. In the highlands, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 1<sup>st</sup> Division and the 101<sup>st</sup> deployed to meet a redoubled effort from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to build strength from their base areas deep in the jungle.

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's three division-level operations conducted during these years reflected this transition from pacification to pacification support. Operations Randolph Glen (7 September 1969 – 31 March 1970), Texas Star (1 April 1970 – 5 September 1970), and Jefferson Glen (5 September 1970 – 8 October 1971) each demonstrated a steadily declining South Vietnamese need for American support in the pacification campaign, but an increasing requirement for help against the NVA. Between Randolph Glen and Jefferson Glen, the North and South Vietnamese governments both advanced significant initiatives that had consequences for the way both sides fought the pacification campaign in Thua Thien. Still, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division kept infantry battalions in direct support of pacification in two troublesome districts through most of 1970 and even with more effective South Vietnamese government institutions in place, communist violence never totally withered away in most other districts. Despite continuing communist pressures, 1970 and 1971 were largely years of relative security and stability for Thua Thien province. However, with the NVA massing in the hills and

attempting to re-fire the insurgency in the lowlands, pacified Thua Thien remained a province at war.

**“The enemy’s plots and schemes”:**

**The Communist Response to Pacification and Operation Randolph Glen**

By the summer of 1969 the communist position in South Vietnam looked bleak. Their partial uprising during Tet in 1968 did not produce general revolution in South Vietnam as promised. In fact, the effective response by their adversaries in the months that followed effectively gutted the Viet Cong (VC) indigenous insurgent infrastructure in many places in South Vietnam and left the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) in provinces like Thua Thien in a stronger position than before January 1968. From the communist perspective in late 1969, American withdrawal from Vietnam appeared to be more of a rhetorical device aimed at the U.S. public than an actuality on the ground. By October 1969, American troop levels had been reduced by 25,000, but units such as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division aggressively pursued NVA units in their mountainous base areas with no indication of let-up, keeping them off balance and unable to effectively aid the insurgents in the lowlands. Additionally, according to their own estimates, the communists now faced twice the number of U.S. and ARVN “mobile battalions” in 1969 than they did in 1968 despite the American withdrawals because of the effectiveness of the territorial forces in assuming “responsibility for ‘pacification’ and defending territory.”<sup>222</sup>

The official Vietnamese history of the war, first published in 1988, acknowledges that “when the United States and its puppets began to carry out their ‘clear and hold’

222. The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. by Merle L. Pribbenow, foreword by William J. Duiker (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 247. “Because his local forces were able to assume a portion of the responsibility for ‘pacification’ and defending territory, the enemy was able to increase his local and strategic reserve forces to more than twice their previous level. In 1968 the puppet army had only 30 mobile battalions, but in 1969 this number grew to 63 battalions.”

strategy, [communist] battlefronts were too slow in shifting over to attacking the ‘pacification’ program and ... did not concentrate ... political and military forces to deal with the enemy’s new plots and schemes.” As a result of the slow reaction to effective execution of pacification by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, “the political and military struggle in the rural areas declined and [the communists’] liberated areas shrank.... [while] most of [their] main force troops were forced back to the border or to bases in the mountains.”<sup>223</sup> Thus, in the summer of 1969, after more than a year of setbacks in South Vietnam at the hands of a successful pacification campaign, the communist leadership faced a similar decision to one that their own 1968 Tet offensive forced the U.S. to make – modify their goals in South Vietnam, or modify their methods and level of commitment. Unlike the American response to Tet 1968, the North Vietnamese leadership did not waver from their goal of a unified, communist Vietnam. Instead, the communists increased mobilization of the population to meet manpower requirements for a larger army in the field and decided to extend the war until more favorable conditions arose on the battlefield.<sup>224</sup> In a further dissimilarity from their American adversaries, North Vietnamese leaders maintained a tight control over information and debate within their country and the role of public opinion counted for little in their decision-making calculus. The intention to eliminate any pessimistic or critical opinions is summarized neatly in one Hanoi directive captured by U.S. forces requiring that “reactionary and stubborn persons must be purged.”<sup>225</sup>

The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) promulgated two major resolutions that U.S. forces captured regarding the operational implementation of these decisions to continue the struggle and change methods on the battlefield. COSVN Resolution 9 was issued in July 1969 and “postulated two broad, alternate developments in the war and proposed strategies to deal with each possibility.” A U.S. intelligence

223. Ibid., 237-38.

224. Ibid., 240-44.

225. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Monthly Intelligence Summary for December 1969, dated 11 January 1970,” p. 4, Box 1, Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

estimate analyzed Resolution 9 as envisioning two scenarios ranging from a political settlement brought about by heavy U.S. casualties to a continued, reduced-strength American presence requiring a longer campaign. To deal with either eventuality, the captured documents indicated that “the communists planned to engage in a protracted conflict in which they would avoid major military confrontations while causing US and ARVN casualties thorough small-unit tactics and attacks by fire.”<sup>226</sup> Tactically, this plan transformed the local force platoons recruited from, operating in, and targeted on gaining control of villages into smaller guerrilla cells employing terror and sapper techniques to discredit GVN security gains and often composed of men from North Vietnam.

COSVN Resolution 14, issued in October 1969, indirectly underscored the effectiveness of pacification programs on insurgent freedom of movement and clarified the role of the new NVA guerrilla cells. Responding to the losses of insurgent cadre and liaison personnel killed and captured by their enemies’ night saturation patrolling, the NVA guerrilla cells “were to be self-sufficient in terms of supply; and where possible, they were to live legally among the South Vietnamese population.” Their mission, as indicated in captured documents, “was to attack the PSDF and RF/PF forces, local police, GVN officials, and pacification cadre – the people who are the instruments of the GVN pacification program.”<sup>227</sup> Thus, in the event of a political settlement, these economy-of-force attacks would preserve the communist position in South Vietnam by not risking the bulk of their forces and paving the way for increased communist political influence in post-settlement government.

Most importantly, the ranks of these squads could be effectively manned and led by the North Vietnamese who came to dominate the VC after 1969. The North Vietnamese realized that “guerrilla operations had declined” as a result of the insurgents’

226. MACV Strategic Research & Analysis Division, Directorate of Intelligence Production, “Estimate of VCI Activities, January to June 71, dated 7 January 1971,” p. 2, Box 13, General Records, Office of Civil Operations for Rural Development Support, MR 1 Public Safety Division, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

227. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

losses.<sup>228</sup> To remedy this, communist forces in the south began filling their ranks with northerners to the point where their official history later claimed “most of the cadre and soldiers of the regiments and armed operations teams operating in the lowlands were natives of North Vietnam” by 1970.<sup>229</sup> By changing their basic offensive formation from local force platoons and companies to small indirect fire and sapper assault squads, the insurgents hoped to hasten American withdrawal through attacks on fixed U.S. installations and fire bases without suffering catastrophic casualties. At the same time, by attacking the principal agents of the GVN pacification program, the insurgents shifted from a positive goal of openly attempting to convert South Vietnamese civilians and control their villages to a negative goal of discrediting GVN-provided security through sapper and terror attacks.

In Thua Thien province, the communists later claimed that they “assigned 1500 main force cadre and soldiers ... as a hard-core framework to be used to build up local district units and village guerrillas.”<sup>230</sup> Over the course of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s Operation Randolph Glen, which lasted from 7 December 1969 to 31 March 1970, the division intelligence section noted “recent PW’s [Prisoners of War] and ralliers taken in the lowlands have revealed that virtually all of the local force VC units operating in the lowlands have received training and reinforcements from NVA units.”<sup>231</sup> Many 101<sup>st</sup> battalions operating in the lowlands also detected a redoubled booby trap effort on the insurgents’ part as the communists implemented stand-off attacks. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade found that “during this period [of Operation Randolph Glen] the majority of the booby traps were constructed of relatively new materials and munitions, showing an emphasis on the enemy’s part of using booby traps as an effective offensive means of inflicting

228. The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 249.

229. *Ibid.*, 249.

230. *Ibid.*, 248.

231. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, “OPORD 13-69: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 29 November 1969,” p. B-1-1, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

friendly casualties.”<sup>232</sup> Even though the VC could not move large quantities of war material from their logistical bases in the NVA base camps because of the tight GVN security blanket in the lowlands, unexploded American bombs and artillery shells provided these insurgents with more than enough ordnance to harass their pursuers.

Increasingly during Operation Randolph Glen, the VC’s chief pursuers came to be South Vietnamese forces instead of American. By design, Randolph Glen featured a partnership between 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s brigades and 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division regiments in the jungle and piedmont areas and a supporting role for the 101<sup>st</sup> in the pacification program. The 101<sup>st</sup>’s account of the operation claimed that Randolph Glen “focused the total energy, resources, and good offices” of the division on the pacification campaign.<sup>233</sup> Rhetorically, the division’s leadership intended to accomplish two overriding tasks; “maintain a shield of security for protection of the people in the lowlands and provide maximum support for the pacification and development goals established by the government of Vietnam.”<sup>234</sup> The 101<sup>st</sup> planned to achieve these tasks by providing – along with the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division – “a belt of security on the periphery of the populated lowland area, extensive assistance to improve the capability of territorial forces to provide security for their homeland, and an all-out effort to support the achievement of all GVN objectives throughout Thua Thien province.”<sup>235</sup>

Each of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s three brigades directed their principle energies on their allotted reconnaissance zones in the piedmont area to curb infiltration into the lowlands, yet still maintained a liaison responsibility with two to four lowland

232. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Randolph Glen, dated 4 April 1970,” pp. 1-3, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II. 3d Brigade AAR filed with 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade documents.

233. 22d Military History Detachment, “Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen,” p. 1, Box 25, After Action Reports, Command Historian, Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. This case study was undated, but probably prepared in 1970 as it is issued under the authority of General Wright, who commanded the division during most of that year.

234. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

235. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

districts in their respective sectors.<sup>236</sup> In these districts, each brigade organized a small Mobile Training Teams (MTT) staffed by experienced junior officers and non-commissioned officers to standardize the training level of the territorial forces in their areas in addition to permanent liaison teams stationed with each district headquarters. Employment of the MTT concept would later be increased as actions directly integrating 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and RF/PF decreased, but until that time Mobile Advisory Teams (MAT) staffed by the U.S. advisory, and not tactical, chain of command assumed responsibility for training those RF units in districts where the 101<sup>st</sup>'s brigades did not habitually operate.<sup>237</sup>

At the outset of Operation Randolph Glen, Hamlet Evaluation Statistics indicated that Thua Thien contained twenty hamlets rated "A" (adequate security forces, infrastructure eliminated), 256 hamlets rated "B" (VC threat exists, security organized, infrastructure partially eliminated), 135 hamlets rated "C" (subject to VC harassment) hamlets, and four hamlets rated "D" (VC activities reduced but still an internal threat) hamlets.<sup>238</sup> In Phong Dien and Phu Loc districts, however, the insurgency proved more troublesome than elsewhere in Thua Thien province. In these two districts, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division maintained an infantry battalion in each to directly aid in pacification. Phong Dien and Phu Loc, located respectively at the far northern and southern boundaries of the province, remained the two most troublesome districts in Thua Thien in part because of a relatively strong pro-insurgent popular sentiment amongst the

236. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, "OPORD 13-69, Operation Randolph Glen, dated 29 November 1969," pp. 4-8. 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade maintained liaison with Phu Loc, Phu Thu, Houg Thuy, and Vinh Loc Districts. 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade maintained liaison with Houg Tra, Nam Hoa, Quang Dien and Phu Vang Districts. 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, which also had a contingency mission to reinforce the De-Militarized Zone in Quang Tri province to the north, maintained liaison with Phong Dien and Houg Dien Districts.

237. Hq., 101st Airborne Division "Operation order 13-69: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 29 November 1969," pp. M-1 through M-5, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI.

238. Hq., 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101st Airborne Division "Operation Randolph Glen Analysis Briefing, dated 15 April 1970," Hamlet Evaluation Chart, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.



population and secondly because of NVA determination to push reinforcements through the heavily-patrolled areas to prop up the infrastructure in each. As of December 1969, Phong Dien contained three of Thua Thien's four remaining "D" rated hamlets and fifteen additional "C" rated hamlets, while fifty of Phu Loc's hamlets maintained a "C" Hamlet Evaluation System rating out of the 135 total "C" rated hamlets in Thua Thien. Significantly, Phu Thu district, in which the 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry conducted Operation Saturate for the preceding two months also contained one "D" rated and twenty-four "C" rated hamlets, but territorial forces in Phu Thu were considered trained by the beginning of Randolph Glen and slowly made progress in establishing a pacified district.<sup>239</sup> In contrast, the territorial forces of Phong Dien and Phu Thu received far less attention from U.S. or ARVN forces to this point.

The 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry deployed with territorial forces in Phu Loc district and the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry operated in a similar fashion out of Phong Dien district. In addition to their direct responsibilities in these districts, RF companies located in other districts rotated through for a few weeks at a time "to conduct combined operations and on-the-job training with the two dedicated battalions."<sup>240</sup> These battalions also each maintained liaison teams with four adjacent districts in the event that a situation might require American ground forces to back up RF companies. Both battalions conducted roughly the same type of actions and achieved similar results, but the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry left the most complete and detailed records of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's final direct involvement in the lowland pacification campaign.

In December 1969 and January 1970, 3-187 Infantry followed the now-standard and successful recipe for pacification success by conducting a series of cordon operations along with the Phong Dien Regional Force companies. After a year and a half of cordons, though, both sides learned more effective techniques to alternately

239. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, "Operation Order 13-69: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 29 November 1969," Annex G (Civil Military Operations), Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI.

240. 22d Military History Detachment, "Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen," p. 6.

implement and slip through them. On the communist side, guerrilla fighters no longer lived and operated extensively in the villages and armed insurgents never were cornered into fighting or surrendering weapons in any of 3-187 Infantry's cordons during Randolph Glen as happened so frequently before. Following communist practices established after the disastrous winter of 1968-9, members of the infrastructure attempted to evade, rather than resist, the allied sweeps whenever possible even though GVN police, tracking, and interrogation methods became more sophisticated.

As the frequency of contacts decreased on cordon actions, the precision of screening and attention devoted to minimizing negative impact on villagers increased. In the seven joint cordons conducted in December and January, 3,431 Phong Dien villagers were screened, resulting in forty-two suspects being detained for further questioning, and all but five of these suspects being released.<sup>241</sup> Significantly, these suspects then went through district and police channels for questioning and processing by South Vietnamese district and police officials instead of a joint U.S./ARVN military intelligence center as usually happened before.<sup>242</sup>

The 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry companies supplemented their cordon operations by conducting medical check-ups and providing rudimentary medical care for the villagers during the long screening process, and in addition to reporting numbers of persons screened and detained, units undertaking cordon operations also reported numbers of villagers served refreshments, entertained, and receiving medical care.<sup>243</sup> In making these adaptations, the American effort in the villages had come full circle from the methods typified by 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's Operation Greenleaf conducted almost three

241. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, "Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970," pp. 5-11, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chiefs of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

242. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, "Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 30 June 1970," p. 9, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI.

243. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, "Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970," pp. 5-11.

years earlier.<sup>244</sup> In contrast to earlier techniques such as Greenleaf, which had emphasized quick fixes and the short term generation of goodwill, villagers now knew that 101<sup>st</sup> infantry companies and the territorials were expected to be the vanguard of a long process of creating permanent security and more than purveyors of entertainment, technology, and medicine.

Aside from the ubiquitous cordons, 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry employed extensive “daily combined operations [with Regional Forces]... in order that US soldiers could demonstrate, by example, those teaching points stressed during training.”<sup>245</sup> By 1970, for the most part, the Regional Forces companies were more capable than when built essentially from scratch in 1968 and early 1969 and did not require extensive American mentoring as before. Habitually, only one of the U.S. companies worked and trained directly with their South Vietnamese counterparts while the other three 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry and nine Phong Dien RF companies operated independently, conducting daytime patrols and night saturation ambushes.<sup>246</sup> U.S. companies compensated for the loss of local and language expertise provided by RF soldiers through the use of ARVN translators and “Kit Carson Scouts” – VC ralliers who volunteered to serve with American combat units.<sup>247</sup> For the territorial forces, advisory teams from the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry enabled the South Vietnamese access to U.S. indirect fire support and training techniques.<sup>248</sup>

244. See Chapter I, pp. 8-9 for a summary of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s Operation Greenleaf conducted in IV Corps Tactical Zone.

245. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970,” pp. 3-4.

246. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen; dated 30 June 1970,” Enclosure 4 (Territorial Forces), Appendix 1- Territorial Forces Distribution.

247. *Ibid.*, Appendix 1 (Kit Carson Scouts) to Enclosure 9 (Psychological Operations). The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division reported that Kit Carson Scout strength increased from 205 to 261 during Operation Randolph Glen.

248. For a good account of what these 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry teams trained GVN Regional Forces, Popular Forces, and PSDF see “Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970,” Enclosure 2 (Combined Training and Operations).

Instead of direct contact, these patrols and ambushes most frequently encountered booby traps rather than groups of enemy soldiers as evidenced by the 154 booby traps found and 37 detonated by U.S. and GVN troops in Phong Dien district over the course of Randolph Glen.<sup>249</sup> When 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry patrols did find the enemy, more often than not, they were NVA patrols moving from their base camp areas to support the VCI in the villages. Unlike the black-clad, minimally-outfitted VC encountered during earlier ambushes in the lowlands, more and more now turned up enemy “dressed in green fatigues and HCM [Ho Chi Minh] sandals ... [wearing] OD [olive drab] uniforms, [carrying] rucksacks, and AK-47 rifles.”<sup>250</sup> These infrequent contacts aside, U.S. soldiers with earlier experience in Vietnam noticed during 1970 a “winding down” for the U.S. ground effort where “the intensity of the conflict was less and there was more hanging-around time at both the base camps and out in the field, to some degree.”<sup>251</sup> Adding to the notion of a lower intensity of combat operations, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division instituted a battalion seven- to ten-day “stand-down” rotation policy at the end of Operation Randolph Glen. This program continued until the division’s redeployment in February 1972 and allowed each infantry battalion to move from their tactical mission onto an established base camp to “rest, retrain, and improve the quality of the soldiers.”<sup>252</sup> Officers found the training beneficial for their units and the break a morale booster for their soldiers, but only the more relaxed pace of operations allowed for such luxuries.

249. Hq., 101st Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970,” pp. 5-11.

250. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 4 April 1970,” p. 3, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II. 3d Brigade AAR filed with 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade documents.

251. Richard Taylor, “Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jose Feliciano,” p. 9, Box 12, Oral History Interviews, Company Command in Vietnam Series, MHI. Before commanding a company in the 1-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry from August to January 1970, Captain Feliciano commanded an infantry company the 23<sup>rd</sup> (Americal) Infantry Division from December 1967 to May 1968, also in I Corps.

252. Hq., 1-502 Infantry, “Combat After Action Interview Report, dated 7 June 1970,” p. 2, Box 4, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations S-3, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

Thus, the pacification campaign in Phong Dien during Randolph Glen became one of attrition with territorial forces asserting themselves after shorter periods of training with and support by U.S. units. Communist booby traps continued to take their tolls on combat forces and villagers alike while NVA guerrillas took over more of the combat role from the insurgents in the lowlands.<sup>253</sup> U.S. and GVN units whittled away at the insurgent infrastructure through intelligence gained the hard way on documents captured with those enemy killed in ambushes and interrogation of wounded prisoners.<sup>254</sup> Refined search and identification techniques also aided the insurgent identification effort and, just as importantly, demonstrated to the villagers the increased will and capability of the GVN to combat the insurgency. Neither side held such a decisive edge over the other that could produce immediate decision, but as long as major NVA incursions could be kept out of the lowlands, time finally lay on the side of the GVN's pacification program and after years of missteps and dashed hopes the South Vietnamese were providing for their own security in Thua Thien's population centers.

Paradoxically, then, Operation Randolph Glen was not "a radical departure from what has become the conventional approach to the US effort in Vietnam at division level" as Major General John M. Wright, the 101<sup>st</sup>'s commander, claimed in the commander's remarks of the division review. In fact, the rhetoric of devoting the "entire division ... to assisting in the pacification and development of a province" contained in the 101<sup>st</sup>'s account of Randolph Glen lagged at least six months behind the reality on the

253. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, "Combat After Action Interview Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 Dec 69 to 14 Feb 70; dated 7 March 1970," pp. 3-4 and 5-11, Box 19, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/S-3), 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II. The insurgents extensively booby trapped the refugee re-settlement area in an attempt to deter the refugees from returning and discrediting the GVN re-settlement program. To combat the insurgent booby trap program, the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry began "flame drops" of thousands of gallons of jelled gasoline from CH-47 helicopters to detonate booby traps and clear underbrush for cultivation.

254. *Ibid.*, Appendix 1 (VC Infrastructure) 3 pages. The 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry's intelligence section lists three pages of by-name VCI eliminated during Randolph Glen with details of their position within the infrastructure and the circumstances of their death, capture, or surrender.

ground.<sup>255</sup> The most intense period of 101<sup>st</sup> and GVN ground forces interaction occurred from the summer of 1968 when U.S. units “discovered” the territorial forces for the first time until the summer of 1969 when these RF and PF units demonstrated the capability to conduct cordons and saturation patrols largely on their own. Randolph Glen did feature the matured provincial-ARVN-U.S. command team started during Operation Nevada Eagle in mid-1968 and better theoretical integration of the big unit fight in the highlands with pacification in the lowlands, but the departure from a more conventional approach on the ground occurred over the preceding eighteen months, not in December 1969.<sup>256</sup>

Instead, during Randolph Glen, American and ARVN battalions returned overwhelmingly to their sometimes-maligned search for main force units in the jungle.<sup>257</sup> As the attached table of the division’s infantry platoon utilization shows, only two of the 101<sup>st</sup>’s nine infantry battalions expended the majority of their efforts in the lowlands.<sup>258</sup> In contrast to previous allied efforts, neither army neglected the pacification program in the lowlands and the clear threat to the GVN survival now lay with the NVA and not the insurgents. Training teams of all descriptions, aviation, engineer, and artillery units all acted in support of GVN security forces, even though U.S. infantry battalions operated less frequently with their South Vietnamese allies rather than more. The seven 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne infantry battalions committed to interdict infiltration in the piedmont operated

255. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 30 June 1970,” p. 19.

256. 22nd Military History Detachment, “Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen,” p. 3. “The focal point for coordination of all efforts in Thua Thein Province was the informal Area Coordination Committee composed of the CG, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division; CG, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division (ARVN); the province chief; and US senior advisors. This committee coordinated broad policies for the employment of military forces to accomplish the established objectives and determined priorities for pacification and civic action.”

257. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Randolph Glen Analysis Briefing, dated 15 April 1970,” Rifle Platoon Availability Chart, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II

258. See Appendix C: 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Employment of Rifle Platoons, Spring 1970.

almost exclusively as purely American companies and battalions. The two battalions committed in the lowlands maintained extensive liaison with the various districts of Thua Thien. However, these U.S. companies in the lowlands became more of an adjunct force to the territorials because they were seldom used in their originally-conceived role as a fire brigade to backstop major insurgent surprises that never materialized.

**“Per instructions from the district chief”:**

**GVN Initiatives and Operation Texas Star in the Summer of 1970**

Successes in the pacification campaign from the summer of 1968 through 1969 gave the Republic of South Vietnam the vital time and security to institute political reforms needed to cement security gains into long-term stability. Drawing on the lessons of the 1969 Combined Campaign Plan, the first truly effective joint strategy effort between the South Vietnamese government and U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the allied leadership in Saigon developed an eight-point Combined Campaign Plan for 1970 to take advantage of the improved security situation that existed in most of South Vietnam.<sup>259</sup> Land reform, village and hamlet level elections, and directly arming the people through the People’s Self Defense Forces (PSDF) constituted the three most important initiatives to come out of the 1970 Combined Campaign Plan with regard to the pacification campaign. All three of these measures were envisioned to directly attack the roots of the communist insurgency and came to fruition in the relatively secure environment prevalent in most populated areas of South Vietnam during 1970 and 1971.

Village and hamlet level elections proved to be the least substantial of the three measures, with the least direct, short-term benefit on either the people’s support of the South Vietnamese Government (GVN), or threat to the communist insurgency. While

259. Ibid., Chart 1, The eight goals of the 1970 Combined Campaign Plan were; Territorial Security, Protection of the People against Terrorists, People’s self-defense, Improved local administration, Greater National Unity, Brighter life for war victims, Better public information, and Prosperity for all. All programs and initiatives fell under one or more of these generalized themes.

they were important to the long term development of the Republic of Vietnam, in 1970 they were secondary to improving the efficiency of existing GVN institutions, and were accordingly suspended in 1972 after the communist spring offensive upset the security balance in Thua Thien province. The relative importance of elections can also be gauged by the communists' attempts to disrupt them. During the summer of 1970's hamlet, village, and provincial election cycle, insurgents did not target a single polling station or election target even though security forces and GVN office-holders sustained a fair number of bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings over the same time.<sup>260</sup>

Each round of elections held in 1970 generated respectable turn-out, with a minimum of 75 percent of eligible voters going to the polls. These high voter numbers masked the deeper problems with the GVN election system. A "lack of qualified candidates" caused a number of village elections to be postponed on several occasions until suitable men could be found.<sup>261</sup> Suitable candidates referred to the screening process that each potential candidate went through in an attempt to ensure that communists did not gain a further avenue to infiltrate the government. Other than loyalty, simple demographics also restricted the number of candidates. "In many villages there were very few youths left and the majority of their population consisted of elderly people, women and children," one senior South Vietnamese officer recalled. "As a result, the GVN had to bring in people from outside to run for office."<sup>262</sup> Obviously, the local security situation constituted a further restriction and "electoral process were only held where GVN control was tight enough to ensure effective leverage over village

260. John W. Chism, "Thua Thien Province Reports," April 1970 through August 1970, Monthly Province Reports, Jan – Dec 1970, Box 14, Monthly Province Reports, Advisory Team 18, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II. All province and district reports from the Advisory Team 18 are hereafter referred to by their location and date of report. Unless otherwise noted, all Advisory Team 18 reports are located in Box 14. In August 1970, Mr. Robert Wenzel took over as Thua Thien's senior advisor from Colonel John Chism.

261. Ibid.

262. Tran Dinh Tho, *Indochina Monographs: Pacification* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 148.



councils.”<sup>263</sup> As these examples suggest, the GVN instituted controls necessary to ensure that the democratic process did not disrupt institutions finally displaying some competence in fighting the communists. In reality, the villagers voted with the information provided to and participation in local security forces and not ballots. While at war with the North, Thua Thien and the rest of South Vietnam required an effective government and not necessarily a democratic one.

Land reform also produced enigmatic direct results on the pacification program. One knowledgeable Vietnamese observer called the “Land to the Tiller” program the only truly successful social change attempted by the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>264</sup> In theory, the Presidential Decree 3/70 of 26 March 1970 terminated the practice of land rent and gave peasants the rights to the land they tilled. It also should have generated a groundswell of popular support for the GVN amongst the villages and what amounted to a social revolution.<sup>265</sup> The traditional agricultural villages that filled the lowlands of Thua Thien should have been far more concerned with the implications of owning their own land than the abstract notions democratic governance, but the true impact on the pacification effort on the ground is difficult to measure. Advisory Group 18’s monthly province reports, which comprehensively cover all important social, economic, and military developments in Thua Thien, make no mention of any popular reaction, or even the decree itself. Similarly, the battalions of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division stationed in the lowlands record no impact and little indication that villagers gained the right to own their own land, except in resettlement areas which had been cleared of insurgent control and re-settled by refugees.<sup>266</sup>

263. Ibid., 156.

264. Ibid., 155-56.

265. Ibid., 142.

266. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Texas Star for the period 1-30 April 1970, dated 19 May 1970,” pp. 14-15, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II. From October 1969 to April 1970, 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry helped clear and secure areas of Huong Dien and Quang Dien districts that were evacuated after Tet 1968 for 11,000 refugees to resettle.

The development of the People's Self Defense Force (PSDF) represents perhaps the best indirect measure of the villagers' loyalty to the government and the government's confidence in the villagers. Armed villagers could choose to resist any and all forms of outside control – be they communist, GVN, or American – and though the PSDF had been a paper militia for some time in South Vietnam, where widespread doubt about the loyalty of the villagers to the Saigon government kept the surplus weapon and small supply of ammunition to be distributed down to individual households in the plans file cabinet and off the battlefield.<sup>267</sup> Still, as 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division records indicate, in order to accomplish two of the 1970 Combined Campaign Plan goals of providing security for 100 percent of the population and protecting the people from terrorism, “it was necessary to reconstruct and revitalize the People's Self Defense Forces.”<sup>268</sup>

In Thua Thien, district officials made participation in the PSDF mandatory for all males below and above the age for military service and even voluntary for women of all ages. These raw recruits received rudimentary military training in the form of marksmanship and constructing defensive fighting techniques, but were not expected to fight offensively or as cohesive military units like the Popular Forces platoons they were intended to supplement.<sup>269</sup> District officials did not arm the villagers haphazardly and remarks in 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne records such as “the PSDF weren't entrusted with weapons by the district chief even though the weapons were authorized and on-hand at district headquarters” give some idea of the baseline loyalty to the GVN that full participation in the PSDF represented.<sup>270</sup> By April 1970, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division reported over 30,000 PSDF members organized, trained, and armed out of a total province population of approximately 600,000, but the district strength breakdown gives an indication of the

267. 22<sup>nd</sup> Military History Detachment “Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 December 1969 to 31 March 1970,” People's Self Defense Force Sheet.

268. Ibid.

269. Ibid.

270. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Interview Report: Sniper Contact, 10 September 70,” p. 1, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

relative GVN control over the area. Hue, Phu Vang, Huong Tra, and Quang Dien all supported over 2,000 PSDF members each, with Hue and Phu Vang counting for more than 5,000 apiece. At the same time, troublesome Phong Dien and Phu Thu district each contained less than 1,000 PSDF members.<sup>271</sup>

In the field, the PSDF produced the uneven results as might be expected from a raw, largely leaderless outfit. Still, they usually demonstrated the capacity of taking on their primary targets of insurgent terrorism, if not always in the most thorough and efficient manner.<sup>272</sup> Some accounts of their actions read more like vigilante mobs than organized self-defense forces, such as a 26 April 1970 incident in Huong Tra district where “PSDF surrounded a group of VC in a house at 2115 hours [and] a firefight ensued with three VC in the house. Results were one VC KIA, one civilian WIA and one pistol captured. The VC had been at his house collecting food. The other two VC managed to escape.”<sup>273</sup> A second incident from June 1970 in Phong Dien district gives some indication of the deterrence effect – if not combat effectiveness – of these minimally-trained levies; “The National Police and the PSDF of Phong Hoa village

271. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 December to 31 March 1970,” Appendix 1 (Territorial Forces Distribution), Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

272. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combined Operations and Training Notes, dated 27 February 1970,” p. 1, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II. The 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s guide of the employment of PSDF notes “PSDF units should not group together at night in a single place ... where they are apparent and easy targets for the enemy.” Furthermore, “PSDF members should be deployed inside and on the periphery of the hamlet or village at night and in small groups (two or three men) so that they may interdict the enemy guerrilla fashion, making maximum use of the element of surprise and thus ensuring the greatest use of their firepower.”

273. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Texas Star, dated 19 May 1970,” pp. 3-7, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

engaged a VC squad at 15 meters with small arms fire as the enemy were attempting to enter the village. The enemy did not return fire and fled in an unknown direction.”<sup>274</sup>

Arming the people to demonstrate their loyalty to the GVN was not simply an end in itself. An invigorated PSDF served as part of a trickle-up effect of South Vietnamese combat effectiveness that U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders both thought would take the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s infantry battalions out of a job in Thua Thien.<sup>275</sup> With improved NPFF and PSDF forces capable of taking on the VCI and small terrorist actions in secured areas, the 43 RF companies and 169 PF platoons available in Thua Thien province in April 1970 could mass sufficient forces for the long times often needed to clear the insurgents from contested lowland areas without assistance from either the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne or 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division. When freed from their responsibilities in the lowlands, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division intended to use the upcoming summer dry season campaign to prepare the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division to take on the NVA main force units on their own in the mountains of Thua Thien with an eye towards more ambitious and yet-unspecified “future operations which extended beyond Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces.”<sup>276</sup>

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne began the 1970 dry season campaign, named Operation Texas Star, on 1 April 1970 when “weather conditions ... improved significantly and it became possible to increase the tempo of offensive operations against enemy base areas which had been established west of the piedmont during the northeast monsoons.”<sup>277</sup> Building on “the foundation for progress in the lowlands developed during Randolph Glen,” whose “basic concepts” of building GVN security capability and support of the

274. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “After Action Feeder Report, Operation Texas Star, dated 18 August 1970” pp. 1-6, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

275. 22d Military History Detachment, “Case Study: Operation Randolph Glen,” p. 4.

276. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report, Operation Texas Star, 1 April to 5 September 1970, dated 23 September 1970,” p. 3, Box 34, After Action Reports, Command Historian, United States Army Vietnam, RG 472, NARA II.

277. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

Combined Campaign Plan the Texas Star planners thought “remained valid,” the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division sought to counter “the forward dispositions and build-up of enemy forces in the western portion of the division [Area of Operations].”<sup>278</sup> Leaving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade responsible for pacification and development support, the 101<sup>st</sup>’s 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades would “conduct offensive operations against enemy units in the western portions of the province.”<sup>279</sup>

3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry remained committed to northern Thua Thien province as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s mission of dedicated pacification support for the duration of Operation Texas Star and 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry assumed 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s similar role in the southern districts of the province. In an indication of the territorials’ lessening need for U.S. backing, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s dedicated battalions’ assigned areas of operation were expanded to include direct responsibility for four districts. In the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s example, only “a company remained with Phong Dien district,” and “emphasis of the Mobile Training Team effort was redirected from a training role to a concentration on rejuvenating the Vietnamese supply system.”<sup>280</sup> By June 1970, the battalion deployed “one company patrolling vicinity the firebase, and two companies operating in the unpopulated lowlands of southern Phong Dien district” as two RF companies and one PF platoon conducted cordon and search of a village in Phong Dien in which “219 individuals were processed and two were detained” but later released after interrogation at the district headquarters.<sup>281</sup> With territorial forces capable of conducting such local security missions unaided, the 3-187<sup>th</sup>’s primary combat duty became searching for infiltrating NVA guerrillas and maintaining the battalion’s, “eight Mobile Training

278. Ibid.

279. Ibid.

280. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Texas Star, dated 30 June 1970,” p. 2, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

281. Hq. 3-187 Infantry, “After Action Feeder Report: Operation Texas Star, dated 20 July 1970” p. 1, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

Teams [that] remained deployed and co-located with territorial forces to evaluate tactical operations and upgrade the Vietnamese Supply System.”<sup>282</sup>

For South Vietnamese villagers and GVN officials, however, communist capabilities remained a threat in many districts. Terror attacks of assassination, kidnapping, and assaults upon district official buildings were the method of choice for the insurgents during Texas Star. In one typical example, “six VC entered a village in Huong Tra district during the evening and murdered a woman” in May 1970. At this stage of the conflict, separating ideologically-motivated action from simple revenge-taking and murder could be difficult. In this instance, “a note attached to her body by the VC stated that she was an informer,” indicating a political or military pretext for the killing.<sup>283</sup> Other times, such as an April 1970 attack in which “one VC squad entered the hamlet of Van Xa, [also in Huong Tra district] murdered three civilians, wounded one, and kidnapped four civilians,” the motives of the attacks were less clear.<sup>284</sup> In another report of seemingly random violence from early July 1970, “20 VC entered a village and fired 1 RPG and small arms into [a village].” In this case, the “PSDF returned small arms fire and at 0200 hours, VC departed in unknown direction.”<sup>285</sup> Actions such as these surely created doubts on the part of many villagers exactly what the insurgents’ promised liberation from the Americans and their puppets might entail for them.

Typically, small insurgent bands entered villages at night to settle scores with hamlet or village leaders, or occasionally prominent citizens in order to intimidate the populace. In one of the more discombobulated exchanges, twelve “VC kidnapped the village chief and his assistant, four other members of the village administrative council, and five PSDF” during a midnight council meeting. Yet, “due to the rapidity with which

282. Ibid.

283. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Texas Star, dated 30 June 1970,” p. 2.

284. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Texas Star, dated 19 May 1970,” pp. 3-7, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

285. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “After Action Feeder Report: Operation Texas Star, dated 18 August 1970” pp. 1-6.

the VC wanted to move and the size of the group, the deputy village chief and five PSDF managed to escape.”<sup>286</sup> Even more rarely, the insurgents gathered the strength to attack a police or territorial force outpost and on one recorded occasion boldly occupied a village “for approximately thirty minutes and departed” before security forces arrived.<sup>287</sup> Thus, the pacification glass was either half empty – in that the VC insurgents and NVA guerrillas still mounted attacks on the lowland populace, or half full – in that these attacks occurred at a low frequency for a province at war with an obstinate enemy.

The two 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division battalions still committed directly to the pacification campaign during Texas Star were not needed to repulse any major communist actions in the lowlands and in this respect the counter-insurgency glass appeared half-full and pacification on track in Thua Thien. The 1-502<sup>nd</sup> and 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry therefore devoted their efforts to supporting the territorial forces through Mobile Training Teams and occasionally providing capabilities that district forces lacked, such as snipers. One combat example from the 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry’s sniper platoon gives a good example of the integration of U.S. and GVN institutions and the nature of the war during Texas Star for an American unit at the squad level. In early May 1970, the Phu Thu district chief requested 1-502<sup>nd</sup>’s sniper platoon to counter “increasing enemy activity” that occurred because of an exchange that occurred the week prior in which the VC carried out one assassination and the RF later killed the VC district police chief during a sweep.<sup>288</sup>

Though “the villages in the immediate area were considered pacified and the populace was not considered sympathetic to enemy forces,” intelligence provided by the MACV District Intelligence Operations Center – a combined U.S. and Vietnamese information collection center – indicated “that there were 70 VCI and 30 to 40 VC within the district.” Furthermore, “a recent agent report indicated that an element from a

286. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Texas Star, dated 19 May 1970, “ pp. 3-7.

287. Ibid.

288. Hq., 1-502 Infantry, “Combat After Action Interview Report, dated 16 May 1970,” p. 2, Box 4, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations S-3, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

NVA sapper platoon had infiltrated the area and a B-40 rocket launcher had recently been found in an old bunker,” which indicated that the NVA might come to reinforce the local insurgents, exploit their assassination, or take some of the significant stores of rice held in the village. The 1-502<sup>nd</sup> Infantry force, a five-man sniper team led by a 23 year-old sergeant and containing four other 20 year-old junior enlisted men, “was to engage any person between 2000 and 0500 [hours] per instructions from the district chief.”<sup>289</sup>

Following a night spent without seeing any movement in their sector one of the snipers “at 2210 hours spotted three individuals with the naked eye about 300 meters.” The individuals were “assumed to be VC under the rules of engagement” and “the first and third men carrying rifles at the ready and the middle at sling arms” added a degree of certainty to this assumption.<sup>290</sup> The snipers then shot two of the three enemy soldiers and confident of their accuracy, waited to observe any other enemy movement. When none materialized, they called in to a nearby RF outpost for a sweep of the engagement area to secure the enemy dead or wounded. A platoon from the RF company swept the area about thirty minutes after the engagement, but found only two areas where bodies had been dragged off and no dead or wounded.<sup>291</sup>

Obviously, the 1-502<sup>nd</sup>'s sniper platoon did not end the insurgency in Phu Thu with their action and with no certainty of enemy dead or wounded, could not even contribute statistically to the war's management or analysis. Still, as 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division soldiers learned over the preceding two and a half years, the communist insurgency would be won through a day and night grind of vigilance and not decisive battles. Although no enemy soldiers were confirmed as killed or wounded, this unnamed 6 May 1970 action must be considered a success. The young, almost assuredly all-draftee U.S. sniper section demonstrated considerable skill and dedication fighting a war that some would later remember lost by Tet 1968 or earlier. The small U.S. and GVN units both proved capable in their own rights and able to integrate when needed, as did

289. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

290. Ibid., p. 4.

291. Ibid., p. 5.



the district intelligence center and the Vietnamese district chief and U.S. battalion commander. Finally, even if both enemy soldiers survived their wounds to fight another day, the villagers in one obscure corner of Phu Thu district were protected from communist attacks, terror, or intimidation for at least one more night.

Thus, the impression left on the record indicates that the lowlands in Thua Thien at night in 1970 consisted of several hundred small bands of well-armed men, almost all barely over 20 years old, groping through the dark and attempting to alternately sneak past or surprise each other, all while avoiding mines and booby traps hidden below and the fire of aircraft and artillery on call from above. For every U.S. or South Vietnamese patrol that found the enemy or his booby traps, perhaps a hundred more typically returned from a night laying in ambush outside a South Vietnamese village without result.

By 1970 South Vietnamese patrols in Thua Thien returning without contact usually served as a confirmation of information provided by prisoners and ralliers indicating “that the enemy is still experiencing food shortages and morale problems” whereas earlier such results tended to indicate a lack of South Vietnamese capability. As the attached chart of the province’s array of territorial forces shows, throughout Texas Star, Thua Thien possessed an impressive counter-insurgent capability on paper that for the most part performed well in practice also.<sup>292</sup> At the end of the operation, even though “the [VC] local force units [were] increasing their activity of terrorism and kidnappings,” as the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry intelligence summary of Texas Star explained, the VC “still remain combat ineffective and have continued to be reinforced and by the NVA.”<sup>293</sup> At the same time, the GVN pacification effort showed a declining need for American assistance and for the 3-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s area of northern Thua Thien, “Houng Dien, Quang Dien, and Houng Tra [districts] security of the population was almost

292. See Appendix D: Thua Thien Provincial Forces, 1970

293. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Texas Star, dated 20 September 1970,” p. 1, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

entirely provided by territorial forces,” with only “platoon-size U.S. elements ... maintained in the unpopulated areas of Quang Dien and Huong Tra for brief periods at the request of the respective district chiefs.<sup>294</sup> The upcoming Operation Jefferson Glen would further rely on the notion of a largely pacified Thua Thien province in order to complete the process of transferring the remaining burden of ground combat against the communists to South Vietnamese force.

**“This drive did not materialize”:**

**Vietnamization, Operation Jefferson Glen, and Withdrawal**

Operation Jefferson Glen, the longest single divisional action undertaken by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in Vietnam, spanned just over thirteen months from 5 September 1970 until 8 October 1971. Despite the length of this operation, Jefferson Glen serves as a better example of Vietnamization rather than pacification due to the dearth of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division infantry units needed in the lowlands after the completion of Texas Star and over two years of dedicated work. In preparing for Jefferson Glen’s execution, division planners stressed “support for ARVN pacification and redevelopment programs,” but realized “diminished US presence as the order of the day” and established a “requirement to divest the division of its responsibility for maintenance of security in the lowlands” due to “the attendant high risk of incidents involving friendly civilians.”<sup>295</sup> The twin forces of an ongoing, inevitable U.S. ground force reduction and increasing South Vietnamese capabilities to combat the enemy in Thua Thien formed unstated, but undoubtedly understood factors in the conceptualization of Jefferson Glen. According to the plan, the American withdrawal would take place as South Vietnamese

294. Hq., 3-187 Infantry, “Combat After Action Feeder Report: Operation Texas Star, dated 19 May 1970,” p. 14, Box 19, Command Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence/Operations (S-2/3), 3d Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Infantry Units, RG 472, NARA II.

295. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Jefferson Glen/Monsoon Plan 70, dated 3 November 1971,” p. 17, Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

capability increased and thus the relatively high level of pacification in Thua Thien formed a chief assumption in the 101<sup>st</sup>'s concept for transferring all ground combat to the South Vietnamese.

In a 23 December 1969 memo to all major subordinate commands, MACV codified the policy of "Vietnamization" as "the process by which the U.S. assists the Government of Vietnam to assume increasing responsibility for all aspects of the war and all functions inherent in self-government." On the U.S. side, the objective was "to permit the U.S. to reduce its military and civilian presence in Vietnam without unacceptable risks to the objectives of the United States and the security of Free World and GVN Forces."<sup>296</sup> After the war, General Phillip Davidson, who served as MACV's senior intelligence officer during this time, was less diplomatic in writing that "Vietnamization was a unilateral American policy designed to sever the interests of the United States, and the United States only."<sup>297</sup> In time, this assessment proved closest to the mark, but from the summer of 1969 throughout 1970, overall U.S. troop strength declined from 475,000 at the end of 1969 to 335,000 at the end of 1970 and major U.S. combat units such as the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Infantry Division, and 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were withdrawn from Vietnam while others such as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne stayed on to build South Vietnamese forces and fight the North Vietnamese.<sup>298</sup> Aside from American troop strength reductions, Vietnamization broke into three "constituent elements; Improvement and Modernization of RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces], Pacification, and Combat Operations."<sup>299</sup>

After analyzing the 101<sup>st</sup>'s operations up to September 1970, the division's planners realized that "Operation[s] Randolph Glen and ... Texas Star were successful in

296. Elias C. Townsend, "Vietnamization, dated 23 December 1969," cover sheet, Box 1, General Records, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations Advisor, First Regional Assistance Command, RG 472, NARA II.

297. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946 – 1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 542.

298. Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 222.

299. Townsend, "Vietnamization, dated 23 December 1969," p. A-1.

preventing enemy incursions into the populated areas .... [and] laid the foundation for an effective Vietnamese security system.” Essentially, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne conducted effective combat operations to spoil NVA forays into the lowlands and helped extensively in the pacification campaign. Ironically, the South Vietnamese ability to conduct conventional operations against the NVA in Thua Thien appeared to be the weak link in the Vietnamization program in September 1970. Realizing this, during Jefferson Glen the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne set out to improve and modernize the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division and “planning for Operation Jefferson Glen was predicated on the realization that ARVN forces still did not possess a capability for extended unilateral operations.” Tactically, “emphasis was placed on upgrading facilities in expectation of the eventual turnover to ARVN forces” especially in the highlands where “all weather hard surface roads were constructed to the principle fire bases and extensive land clearing operations were programmed to facilitate operations without extensive helicopter support” that would be departing with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at some undetermined time.<sup>300</sup> During the first four months of Jefferson Glen, all three brigades of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division conducted continuous raids and reconnaissance missions in the jungle highlands with their counterpart regiments in the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division in order to prepare the South Vietnamese for their first offensive extended unilateral operation – Lam Son 719, the attack against NVA supply routes in Laos.<sup>301</sup>

For Lam Son 719, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division deployed one brigade of four infantry battalions north to Quang Tri province and assumed control of two U.S. separate infantry brigades already located there in order to free the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division and other attached ARVN armored and marine elements for the assault west into Laos from Khe Sanh.<sup>302</sup> The ARVN forces made substantial progress for the first three weeks of Lam

300. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Jefferson Glen/Monsoon Plan 70, dated 3 November 1971,” p. 17.

301. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 573-94. Davidson claims that “the parenthood of Lam Son 719 remains ambiguous. Certainly there was no rush after the controversial event to claim credit for the operation.”

302. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Jefferson Glen/Monsoon Plan 70, dated 3 November 1971,” pp. 46 and 50-53.

Son, reaching Tchepone in Laos and effectively severing the communists' only major remaining supply line into South Vietnam. Not surprisingly, this action brought three NVA divisions to bear against the South Vietnamese forces and fierce battles erupted, halting the ARVN offensive in early March 1971.<sup>303</sup> Soldiers on both sides fought frantically in desperate, often hand-to-hand battles, but by 10 March 1971, "in the face of the build up of numerically superior enemy forces in the objective area," the ARVN commander, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, realized "major additional forces would have been required to proceed with the original plan ... of operating for an extended period in that area" and made the decision to begin withdrawing back to Quang Tri province in South Vietnam.<sup>304</sup>

The ARVN withdrawal from Laos was hard-fought and not always orderly, with battalions and companies "forced to move overland, often at night, in order to break contact and make [helicopter] extraction feasible." NVA units pressed their attacks in close to ARVN units in order to escape the punishing effects of U.S. airpower and ARVN artillery support and inflicted "a mauling" on several of the thirty-four South Vietnamese battalions in the offensive by employing T-34 tanks and human wave

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See page 46 for a summary of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's actions in support of Lam Son 719. Pages 50 through 53 contain a summary of ARVN combat actions in Laos from 8 February to 1 April 1971.

303. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Monthly Intsum [Intelligence Summary] 2-71, dated 10 March 1971," p. 1, Box 1, Monthly Intelligence Summaries, Assistant Chief of Staff G-2, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II. See also Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 581-2. Political motives also played a part in ARVN timidity as the Airborne and Marine divisions were Saigon's palace guard and only reserve. According to Davidson, on 12 February 1971 South Vietnamese President Nguyen Thieu ordered General Lam to halt the offensive if his forces sustained more than 3,000 casualties. In the end, they sustained almost 8,000.

304. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Jefferson Glen/Monsoon Plan 70, dated 3 November 1971," p. 51. General Lam later received low marks for his generalship throughout the war from participants and historians alike. While more forceful leadership may have given the ARVN a slim chance to remain organized and sever the Ho Chi Minh trail, Lam's ineptitude doomed it. See Davison, *Vietnam at War*, 587; Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 31.

assaults on ARVN positions.<sup>305</sup> When the ARVN armored column ran into stiff NVA opposition on its movement back to South Vietnam, General Lam ordered an ARVN marine brigade to “hold and act as a pivot for a drive ... to the east” to rescue the column, however, as the 101<sup>st</sup>’s operations narrative noted laconically, “this drive did not materialize.”<sup>306</sup>

As a result of Lam Son 719, the potential for large-scale NVA offensive action was delayed by a year, but at high cost. Some of the best units of the Republic of Vietnam Army and Marine Corps sustained almost 50 percent casualties in killed, wounded, and missing.<sup>307</sup> Although the South Vietnamese demonstrated their conventional army units were certainly more capable than earlier years, they were not yet up to the task of defeating the NVA in open battle on their own.<sup>308</sup> At the same time, U.S. leaders chose to continue the Vietnamization policy and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne spent the summer of 1971 engaged in less frequent ground combat operations in the jungle against the NVA. Operation Jefferson Glen ended on 8 October 1971, not so much by an event on the ground in Thua Thien, but by the 101<sup>st</sup>’s redeployment to the United States.<sup>309</sup> Operations Order 11-71 began the process on 9 October 1971 that would see the 2-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade become the last 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division infantry battalion to leave South Vietnam on 16 February 1972.<sup>310</sup>

305. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 242.

306. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation Jefferson Glen/Monsoon Plan 70, dated 3 November 1971,” p. 52.

307. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 243.

308. Andrade, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, 1-3. In his prologue, Andrade details the immediate effects of Lam Son 719 on the ARVN. In his introduction, Andrade deals with the longer-term implications of the operation on Vietnamization in the field.

309. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 593-98. Davidson covers the impact of Lam Son 719 on the Vietnamization program in U.S. policymaking. Despite the ARVN weaknesses revealed in the action, Washington remained committed to the U.S. drawdown.

310. Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat Operations After Action Report: Operation OPORD 11-71, 9 October 1971 to 12 February 1972; dated 3 March 1972,” Box 2, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

The ARVN's second test in extended unilateral operations came one month later in the form of the communist 1972 Spring Offensive.<sup>311</sup> As in Lam Son 719, the ARVN performance was uneven, with some units fighting well and many others contributing to the "thousands of military stragglers ... wandering around [Hue] or driving their families southward in ARVN vehicles."<sup>312</sup> After a couple weeks' fighting, in which "NVA tanks invaded the lowlands and conventional warfare engulfed the province's northern districts," the South Vietnamese could not pass the test of stopping the NVA alone and halted the enemy only with massive U.S. tactical air support and after losing all of Quang Tri province to the north of Thua Thien.<sup>313</sup> Within Thua Thien itself, the provincial senior advisor reported in late March that "the name of the game for Thua Thien is clearly survival" and "the residents ... have been badly shaken by these events" leaving "the survivability of Thua Thien ... in doubt."<sup>314</sup>

In conclusion, the major decisions of 1970 and 1971 brought the war in Vietnam to an ironic and disappointing conclusion for the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in early 1972. Paradoxically, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division's three-year success in orchestrating Thua Thien's improving pacification from insurgents forced the communists to the very style of conventional warfare once thought to be the misdirected specialty of the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies. In response to the pacification counteroffensive in 1968 and 1969, the communists redoubled their efforts and transitioned to a more conventional effort emphasizing NVA main force capability at the expense of the insurgency. At the same time, the GVN used this breathing spell to implement important social and security initiatives which largely protected Thua Thien from insurgents during the American withdrawal, but could not stand up to the NVA when

311. For a more complete account of the U.S. involvement and ARVN performance during the 1972 Spring Offensive, see Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*.

312. Robert Wenzel, "Province Report, April 1972, dated 3 May 1972," p. 1, Monthly Province Reports, January to June 1972, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

313. Wenzel, "Province Report, May 1972, dated 3 June 1972," p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

314. Wenzel, "Province Report, April 1972, dated 3 May 1972," p. 1, Advisory Team 18 Collection.

called to do so in the spring of 1971 and 1972. For their part, as the redeployment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne over the 1971-72 winter showed, the Americans chose Vietnamization over pacification.



**CHAPTER V**  
**CONCLUSION:**  
**“THE EXPERIENCES WE HAVE GAINED”**

Lieutenant Colonel Jim Hunt relinquished command of the 1-501<sup>st</sup> Infantry after his battalion helped clear Vinh Loc district from insurgents in September 1968 and attended the U.S. Army War College in 1969. By this time, Vinh Loc already served as a model operation, recorded and circulated as a special case study by the U.S. Military Advisory Command (MACV) in Vietnam. While at the War College, Colonel Hunt wrote an individual research paper outlining many of his division’s counter-insurgency experiences during the summer of 1968 and it was forwarded to the U.S. Army Combat Development Command under the Secretary of Defense’s guidance “that imaginative and substantive ideas developed in selected research papers be given wide dissemination.”<sup>315</sup> Although written in 1970, Colonel Hunt’s words could be taken to accurately describe the state of the U.S. Army’s preparedness for counterinsurgency any of the decades that followed.

In concluding his research paper, Hunt recommended that “service schools must better prepare officers for command assignments in any future stability operation” and listed his own lack of preparedness for integration with South Vietnamese territorial forces as his primary officer’s educational shortcoming. Ignoring the U.S. Army’s history of fighting insurgents, particularly in the Philippines, Mexico, and a half-dozen less recognized stability operations, he declared “it can be said that in the case of Vietnam, we did not have the experience factor to fall back on,” reinforcing the traditional ability of the U.S. Army to forget about its counterinsurgency experiences as rapidly as it is forced to relearn them. The Vietnam experience, Hunt hoped, would be different, and declared “we must not let the experiences we have gained in Vietnam go

315. R.A. Bresnahan, “Memo: U.S. Army War College Individual Research Paper,” undated cover sheet to Lieutenant Colonel Jim I. Hunt paper, Army War College Individual Research Paper, Folder 19, Box 141, RG 319, NARA II.

unused. We must take the lessons learned from our experiences and integrate them into the program of instruction at out service schools.” Hunt also understood the variables involved in his division’s success in Thua Thien and cautioned against the notion “that every successful technique used in Vietnam will work as well in some other country; no doubt they won’t.” However, he saw “doctrinal and conceptual benefit” derived examining the overall execution of the 101<sup>st</sup>’s operations in Thua Thien. Only then, he claimed, could the army move away from “the need to demonstrate various military capabilities in Vietnam” and instead focus on “what is required, and shape our capabilities toward that end.”<sup>316</sup> Perhaps after one more retelling, the experiences of Colonel Hunt and his comrades in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division will not go unused.

Unlike most of America’s wars, where relative success could be easily understood by territory gained and armies destroyed, the conflict in Vietnam requires the analyst to weigh the outcome before discerning any potential lessons. By the end of 1970, MACV’s map displaying the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) ratings for every hamlet in South Vietnam showed an overwhelming preponderance of Secure (“A” rated) and Relatively Secure (“B” rated) hamlets throughout all of South Vietnam except for pockets of Contested (“C” rated) hamlets where neither side had full control in the Mekong delta region southwest of Saigon and in Pleiku and Binh Dinh provinces halfway between Saigon and Hue.<sup>317</sup> In September 1970, nine of Thua Thien’s districts were rated as Relatively Secure, with Phu Vang district attaining an even higher Secure rating.<sup>318</sup> Overall, 91 percent of South Vietnamese *hamlets* were “A” and “B” rated, a

316. Jim I. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” *U.S. Army War College Case Study, 9 March 1970*, pp. 36-37, Folder 19, Box 141, Center for Military History Refiles, Records of the U.S. Army Staff, RG 319, NARA II.

317. CORDS Reports and Analysis Directorate, “30 November 1970 HES Hamlet Map,” Box 397 of 431, Center for Military History Re-files, not filed in a Record Group as of August 2005, NARA II.

318. CORDS Reports and Analysis Directorate, “HES Information Report; Thua Thien Province Data Print-out, dated 31 August 1970,” data sheets not numbered, Box 373 of 431, Center for Military History Re-files, not filed in a Record Group as of August 2005, NARA II.

little over 7 percent “C” rated, and less than 2 percent under VC control by June 1970 according to HES statistics presented by Philip Davidson.<sup>319</sup>

In December 1970, conservative estimates taken from the HES data placed the communists in control of 38,000 of South Vietnam’s 11 million peasants, or 2 percent of the rural *population*, with another 31 percent living in “contested” areas, and 67 percent living under complete GVN protection.<sup>320</sup> In most areas, the insurgency gained no ground from late 1968 until the communist Spring Offensive in March 1972 and in their delta stronghold, the VC effort during this offensive was stillborn and largely ineffective in distracting GVN forces from countering the three North Vietnamese conventional thrusts that occurred elsewhere.<sup>321</sup> Even after the communist Spring Offensive, one analyst observed that “most of those gains held through the intense fighting of 1972” and though setbacks plagued the areas of most intense fighting, the GVN steadily increased control over the rural areas until the final communist offensive in 1975.<sup>322</sup> Thus, the fact that both previous comprehensive examinations of the U.S. counterinsurgency effort at the province level focused on provinces where the insurgency retained its greatest

319. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946 – 1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), 568.

320. Thomas Thayer, *War Without Fronts, The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985), 149-50. Thayer arrived at these more conservative estimates by taking the urban population, which remained “reasonable secure to begin with and with few exceptions, remained so throughout the period” out of the statistics. In December 1970, South Vietnam had a total population of almost 18 million, and a rural population of just over 11 million.

321. Dale Andrade, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle; Halting Hanoi’s 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 461-83.

322. Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, 152. For a discussion of the overall validity of the HES and resulting statistics, see pages 140-52. Thayer found that HES was both valid and reflected reality, “the trends seemed reasonable,” he concluded. “Detailed analysis of the HES data confirm them and so do independent reporting systems outside the HES” such as subjective anecdotal evidence and objective plots of combat against areas classified as under GVN control.

strength points to a need for future work, looking at other provinces, in order to develop a more complete picture of the permutations of the pacification effort.<sup>323</sup>

For historian Eric Bergerud, who examined the American 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's effort in Hau Nghia province which was located along a major communist infiltration route between Saigon and Cambodian border, the mere fact that a hardened cadre of communist insurgents – what he terms “the most politically aware and determined segment of the peasantry” – hung on until the final North Vietnamese assault in 1975 constituted a defeat for the United States and their South Vietnamese allies.<sup>324</sup> Eschewing the HES data, growing efficiency of South Vietnamese forces elsewhere, and need by the insurgents for extensive external support from North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, Bergerud concludes that the communists maintained greater legitimacy than the GVN amongst the South Vietnamese villagers in Hau Nghia simply because more South Vietnamese in the delta were “willing to die for” the communist insurgency than in the security forces of the GVN.<sup>325</sup> Bergerud does not address how many of these politically aware and determined local guerrillas could have survived without extensive infusions of manpower from the north and the considerable distraction provided by the NVA. In the end, Bergerud relies on the *unworthy ally* argument that the inefficiency

323. Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991). See also Kevin M. Boyland, “The Red Queen's Race: The 173d Airborne Brigade and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province, 1969-1970” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1994).

324. Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat*, 326.

325. *Ibid.*, 328. On page 293, Bergerud lists the Hau Nghia HES report for October 1970 as 3 “A” hamlets, 88 “B” hamlets, 38 “C” hamlets, and 7 “D” hamlets. This constituted progress from the January reports, in which 62 were rated as “C” and 46 as “D.” On page 306, Bergerud bases his claim of greater legitimacy for the communists on a “perceived virtue” amongst the peasants which gave the communists a “moral ascendancy in Vietnam that the GVN was never able to counter.” However Bergerud ultimately concludes that “the perception of the Front's [National Liberation Front] virtue was tied to the more important issue of the perception of victory.” The waxing strength of the NVA promised this for the communists, while the waning American presence cast the GVN's victory into doubt. Clearly, moral ascendancy came with some material price.

and illegitimacy of the Saigon government made any American effort ultimately doomed to failure.

In Hau Nghia, the insurgency exploited the split between the urban, Catholic elite of nearby Saigon with close ties to colonial French rule and the predominantly Buddhist peasantry. In overwhelmingly Buddhist Thua Thien, home to Vietnam's ancient imperial capital of Hue and a proud population, a different situation existed. As the 1966 uprising against Saigon and resistance against the North Vietnamese in 1968 and 1972 showed, the villagers of Thua Thien distrusted control from all outsiders, be they from Saigon or Hanoi, and the combat records of the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division and province Regional and Popular Forces indicate large numbers were willing to die in the struggle to retain their particular identity. That the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division, consistently recognized as the GVN's most effective combat unit, was recruited largely from and operated predominantly in Thua Thien province gives further credence to this point.<sup>326</sup>

Alternately, most former U.S. officers who served in Vietnam and some others observers agreed with Phillip Davidson's assessment that "the pacification program in its narrowest sense – the neutralization of the Viet Cong infrastructure in the countryside – was virtually completed by the end of 1970" and would "hold firm, with minor shifts to the combat situation, until the end of the GVN in 1975."<sup>327</sup> According to this view, the insurgency was under control and the war in most of Vietnam being won even though the ARVN's inability to counter growing NVA capability on its own still required substantial U.S. material and combat support. The insurgency still survived, as even the most optimistic reports placed tens of thousands of South Vietnamese citizens under

326. See Chapter III, page 68-69 for comments from American junior officers. See Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 612. Davidson called the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division "the best division in the South Vietnamese army." Also Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, 32. Andrade rated the division as "one of the strongest and most reliable infantry units in the South Vietnamese army."

327. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 570. See also, Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999), 217-27. Based on HES data and anecdotal evidence, Sorley claims that the insurgency was defeated by late 1970 and titled Chapter 13 of his *A Better War* that described this period as simply "Victory."

communist control and several hundred thousand more under direct threat from insurgents, but the trends all flowed in the GVN's favor as long as the North Vietnamese Army could be held at bay. Predictably – and with some justification by the facts on the ground in at least one province – these officers attributed the eventual failure of U.S. policy and collapse of the GVN to a *stab in the back* perpetrated on those Americans and South Vietnamese fighting in Vietnam by political calculations in the United States and not ham-fisted American tactics, or the unworthiness of the GVN in comparison to their communist adversaries.<sup>328</sup> Historian George Herring's statement that "by 1970, the countryside was more secure than at any time since the insurgency had begun" even though fragments remained and the ARVN's capability to deal with the NVA remained uncertain probably landed closest to the mark of the true situation.<sup>329</sup>

That the 101<sup>st</sup> and its South Vietnamese allies beat the insurgents in Thua Thien but ultimately lost the war to an enemy employing mass formations, copious artillery,

328. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 728. See also Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), 183. Davidson blames his own government for failing to educate and explain to its people on "what it was trying to do [in Vietnam], and how it intended to do it." This failure eventually produced the "lack of consensus among the intellectuals, the news media, and political elite" that eroded the American will to prosecute the Vietnam War. Harry Summers likewise concludes that "divergence between what we were doing and what we said we were doing" led to loss of public support. The crux of this argument is that if American goals and the costs required to achieve them in Vietnam could have been accurately explained to the people, the U.S. would have either never gotten as heavily involved as it did, or alternately possessed the resources to fully prosecute the war to victory. Logically, this is a good argument. Practically, most nations have rarely been adept at the required level of prediction, cost/benefit analysis, and long-term planning to make it a valid one.

329. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley & Son, 1979), 227, 269-72. In his conclusion, Herring offers probably the most prescient and dispassionate conclusion on the Vietnam War, lying somewhere between the *unworthy ally* school of inevitable U.S. defeat in Vietnam and the *stab in the back* of a U.S. victory won on the battlefield but lost at home. In response to those who critique the U.S. effort in hindsight as either a miscalculation of Vietnam's importance or an underestimation of costs in sustaining it, Herring postulated that "the uniqueness of Vietnam seems evident, but in a world of diversity it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether a different situation may not be equally unique and intractable." (quotation on page 270)

and armored vehicles should be of little solace to the U.S. Army or Americans at large. The 101<sup>st</sup>'s performance in Thua Thien from 1968 to 1972 simply demonstrates that the U.S. Army can successfully fight insurgencies, just as it has at other times, but never seems to digest these experiences into an institutional memory. Successful pacification techniques in Thua Thien almost always percolated from lower to higher echelons as they were relearned over time.

If any overarching military lesson may come out of an examination of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's fight in Thua Thien, it is that war cannot simply be categorized neatly as "an insurgency" or "conventional war" and trained for, explained to the general public, and executed as such. Conflicts may combine these categories, making them more complicated to fight and more difficult for militaries to achieve their objectives. In the age of nuclear weapons, commanders from companies to theaters are reminded that these objectives have almost always been something less than absolute destruction of the enemy. In the end, victory went to the side that capably employed a variety of methods and combined them with sufficient will on the part of the army, the government, and the people that it governed to achieve their political object – in this case, the communist domination of the people of Thua Thien – despite setbacks and even outright defeats sustained along the way.

Thus, actions at the tactical level cannot, by themselves, win a war. At most, effective tactics can only assist in efficiently attaining the political objectives of the campaign. In this example alone, the U.S. military effort in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 and the communist effort from 1968 until 1970 are great examples of inefficient methods at lower levels being overcome by an abundance of national will at the top to continue the fight. At the higher levels, where the objects of war are formulated and calculus of national will takes place, tactics are a mere detail. For the soldiers and officers serving in the companies and battalions in the field, however, they are tools and the only way a blueprint drawn at higher levels achieves reality on the ground.

In Thua Thien, against the Viet Cong (VC) insurgents, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division needed to solve two key problems in achieving the goals of pacification. The

first involved identifying the enemy and the second concerned the establishing effective local forces. Solving the first problem was diverse, evolving, and depended on local conditions and the status of enemy adaptations to be successful. Alternately, developing territorial forces and later improving of South Vietnamese paramilitary organizations such as the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) were much more uniform and promising solutions to the second obstacle facing the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne.

During its tour in Thua Thien, the 101<sup>st</sup> took part in several battles with battalion-sized enemy formations, but these large battles played into traditional U.S. strengths. When asked if these large battles were the most difficult he encountered during his tour in Vietnam, one 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division company commander replied that the big, intense engagements often found in the months immediately following Tet 1968 “aren’t really the toughest fights because you know where the enemy is.” He elaborated further, “and when you know where he is, it, in my experience, was very easy for any United States unit to confront an enemy unit.”<sup>330</sup>

Obviously, the lightly armed and protected insurgent derives his only protection from more sophisticated government forces by remaining invisible or indistinguishable from civilians. In Thua Thien, the insurgent infrastructure remained indistinguishable through its integration with the village populace. Villagers recruited or motivated to join the VC formed the most obvious example of this phenomenon, but VC cadre from outside the village also established their own integration in these tightly-knit societies by skillfully manipulating the villagers on one hand and effectively applying coercion on the other. In examples like Vinh Loc, the insurgents rapidly lost the ability to stay integrated with the population and were quickly rolled up, never to return in strength. In other examples, such as Captain David Bramlett’s company of the 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry, once friendly forces accurately identified and eliminated those insurgents controlling the enemy coercion mechanisms, the VC lost the cloak of invisibility and did not survive long. Finally, in some areas such as Phu Vang and Phong Dien, the enemy was more

330. Linwood Burner “Interview with Colonel Henry A. Kievenaar,” p.14, Box 20, Company Command in Vietnam Series, Oral History Interviews, 1981-1985, MHI.



deeply integrated and well supported. Here, no single intelligence breakthrough or whirlwind operation exposed the communist infrastructure and the fight became an attritional campaign between security forces and armed guerrillas.<sup>331</sup>

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne relied on several basic methods to identify the infrastructure members. The village cordon served to separate the hardened core of the insurgents from those more lightly coerced or convinced into devotion to communist ideology. In villages where the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) exhibited tenuous control, cordon operations provided the necessary first step in reestablishing GVN authority. In these areas, the VC acted in the open as the de facto government and the presence of large bodies of U.S. and GVN forces to oppose this rule forced the insurgents to either go back underground, or fight to challenge GVN authority. In the summer and fall of 1968, the large killed and captured totals obtained in cordons throughout Thua Thien indicated both the openness with which the VC operated and their intent to remain in control.<sup>332</sup>

Initially, the cordon required a relatively large force to conduct, and the continuous commitment of smaller forces over the following months and years to reconsolidate the government's authority in these areas after the initial investment. Once the insurgents were forced underground by these measures, identifying insurgents became the purview of the combined military intelligence centers and GVN paramilitary forces such as the National Police Field Force, Census Grievance Units, PRU's, and even the Phoenix Program. These organizations relied on tips supplied by villagers and ralliers and information gained from interrogating enemy prisoners and documents found on their casualties. U.S. and GVN military forces often used this intelligence to attack a particularly large or well-protected target, but once insurgent activity was knocked back underground, it became more of a police and less of a military problem. U.S. and GVN conventional forces could undertake this role in the absence of effective local paramilitary organizations if properly trained – Captain Bramlett's C Company

331. See Chapter III, pages 59-66 for an account of actions in Phu Vang. See Chapter IV, pages 89-107 for operations in Phong Dien.

332. See Chapter III for a summary of 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne pacification results in late 1968.

illustrates the effectiveness of a standard U.S. rifle company in maintaining an effective local intelligence network once given a start by the attached PRU team – but most infantry companies and battalions lacked the language and interrogation skills to initiate these programs on their own. When operating in alien cultures, these two shortcomings often pose problems for conventional forces involved in fighting insurgents.

Identifying VC guerilla fighters, on the other hand, remained a military problem throughout the pacification campaign. During the early months of 1968, in Operations Carentan I & II and the beginning of Nevada Eagle, when communist units dug in amongst villagers who did not flee, the U.S. firepower used to dislodge them undoubtedly was not as discriminating as more time and manpower-intensive methods would have been. Once they defeated communist main force units in the lowlands, 101<sup>st</sup> saturation patrols used far less firepower and relied primarily on considerations of location and time to separate guerrillas from civilians. As one battalion commander pointed out, “in any future stability operation, minimum use of firepower must be made, and security of the people must be of the highest priority is we are to get their cooperation and support of the local government.”<sup>333</sup>

By depending on their limited forms of agriculture, villagers in Thua Thien inadvertently aided in the anti-insurgency effort. With few motor vehicles and little electricity, in addition to their labor-intensive work with rice crops, the villagers had little reason to be out of their village after curfew. Thus, curfew could be more easily enforced in rural Thua Thien than in a modern or urbanized environment where the day’s economic and entertainment work did not necessarily end at dusk. Additionally, small VC liaison parties traveling the trails of Thua Thien at night almost always obliged allied forces by carrying weapons openly, making their identification relatively easy at up to 300 meters with even the rudimentary night vision equipment of the day. Undoubtedly, VC Legal Cadre posing as loyal South Vietnamese citizens traveled and conducted unarmed reconnaissance by day, but the overwhelming majority of VC activity occurred at night, when the curfew and activity patterns of civilians exposed the

333. Hunt, “Pacification of Thua Thien Province,” p. 35.

insurgents to much more accurate identification by saturation patrols. In other conflicts, it is doubtful that other insurgents will be as obligingly rigid and forego the protection offered by conforming as much as possible to civilian behavior patterns.

Establishing effective local forces formed the second major puzzle to solve for the 101<sup>st</sup> in Thua Thien province. In this effort, the division used a framework consisting of three elements: energizing an existing territorial forces organization, integrating closely with U.S. units in order to build their confidence to take on the VC, and providing advisors to train the Regional and Popular Forces (RF and PF) on effective small-unit tactics. Without corresponding increase of will to fight against the insurgents on the part of those serving in the territorial forces, however, these three elements would have amounted to nothing. In Thua Thien, strong South Vietnamese provincial leadership and extensive American tutelage produced lasting positive results.

Other provinces were not so fortunate, as Kevin Boyland finds in his study of Binh Dinh province to the south. Boyland attributes the ultimate failure of pacification in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade's sector of Binh Dinh province to a "fast and thin" pacification campaign in which the South Vietnamese territorial forces never outgrew their dependency on U.S. support as they did in Thua Thien.<sup>334</sup> In Binh Dinh, Boyland characterizes the GVN forces and officials there as possessing an "all encompassing weakness and ineffectiveness" just as did those Bergerud examines in Hau Nghia province. Boyland more directly addresses the relationship between insurgent moral superiority and NVA presence, calling the NVA 3<sup>rd</sup> Division "the most visible manifestation of communist strength in Binh Dinh" and attributing significant psychological and operational powers to "its mere presence" near the populated

334. Boyland, "The Red Queen's Race: The 173d Airborne Brigade and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province, 1969-1970," pp. 777-92. Boyland summarized the results of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade's pacification efforts as, "far from causing the South Vietnamese to become more self-reliant, in the end it left them more addicted to American support than they had been at the outset." (page 777) During the North Vietnamese 1972 Spring Offensive, the GVN forces in Binh Dinh collapsed, whereas those in Thua Thien performed more credibly, halting the enemy offensive after the loss of Quang Tri.

lowlands.<sup>335</sup> This 5,000 strong regular NVA unit took two of the four U.S. infantry battalions in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne away from conducting pacification operations in the lowlands and helped “halt the erosion of the NLF’s (National Liberation Front) psychological dominance by causing both the civilian population and South Vietnamese governmental and military personnel to recalculate the odds of GVN victory.” In order to not abandon his thesis that the general unworthiness of the GVN ultimately caused the communist victory, Boyland goes to great lengths to demonstrate the “strength and pervasiveness” of the insurgents even while touting their increasing dependence on outside material, manpower, and psychological support.<sup>336</sup>

When the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne arrived in Thua Thien in March 1968, the territorial forces already existed and did not need to be organized from the ground up. Though they performed poorly in the months leading up to Tet 1968 and during the offensive itself, the Regional and Popular Forces had an internal structure and definite command and control chain within the province. In the wake of the Tet debacle, the GVN and MACV province leadership and advisory teams made little change to the paper organization and equipment of these forces other than a promise to replace their World War II era M-1 rifles with modern M-16 automatic rifles, a step not actually carried out until late 1969. Ultimately, trained and motivated soldiers, not state-of-the-art equipment or radical reorganization, made the difference in creating an effective South Vietnamese regional security force. The equipment only needed to be good enough to

335 Ibid., p. 766. Boyland finds that the 3<sup>rd</sup> NVA Division’s “return to the province in the waning months of 1969 was a pivotal event in the history of Operation Washington Green [the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade’s equivalent to the 101<sup>st</sup>’s Operation Nevada Eagle] because it revolutionized the military situation in [Binh Dinh] almost overnight and robbed the operation of much of its early momentum.”

336. Ibid., pp. 768-72. After making a clear case for the importance of NVA support, Boyland states that “it would be wrong, however, to suggest that the return of the 3<sup>rd</sup> NVA Division was the most important factor in the failure of Operation Washington Green.” Boyland then draws a tenuous connection between communist strength in Binh Dinh province and insurgent strength in 1956 in the Malaysia’s Segamat district during the British counterinsurgency campaign to support his contention that the simple existence of any number of armed insurgents constitutes a victory for their cause. Boyland does not directly address HES statistics for Binh Dinh province at any time.

give these South Vietnamese district-based units the confidence they could take on the insurgents threatening their hamlets.<sup>337</sup>

Advisors and liaison teams constituted a long-standing continuation of the American effort of improving the territorial forces. The venerable MACV advisory effort extended to the district level, but did not concentrate solely on military effectiveness. These small advisory teams and the diverse missions assigned to them precluded extensive contact with any one unit and thus any significant measure of combat effectiveness for Regional or Popular Forces. Instead, territorial forces gained most of their experience on the job in the summer of 1968 as they integrated with 101<sup>st</sup> companies, platoons, and even squads. Additionally, the integration of U.S. battalion headquarters elements with those of South Vietnamese districts gave these GVN staffs and leaders similar confidence as their soldiers to take on the VC. During these initial missions, the simple military effectiveness of an American unit operating alone often was subordinated to complicated chains of command required to integrate a GVN territorial force into an action. It is important to reemphasize that throughout the pacification campaign, combined operations required even the most junior U.S. officers and non-commissioned officers to employ whatever political skills they possessed to get the desired effort and results from their counterparts in the territorial forces.<sup>338</sup>

Following Operation Nevada Eagle, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne brigades and battalions slowly supplemented the MACV advisory effort with their own, homegrown advisory and liaison teams. The training effect of these small groups was secondary to the vital link they provided between the South Vietnamese districts and American support. These teams kept the allied operations and intelligence efforts integrated even when the units no longer needed to operate together as such. Simply training, organizing, and integrating GVN forces with the U.S. effort only gave the South Vietnamese security

337. See Chapter III, pages 67-71 for a summary of the factors important to developing RF and PF proficiency.

338. The Quang Dien operation detailed in Chapter III serves as the best example of this integration at the company and platoon level. Phu Vang and Vinh Loc illustrate combined planning and control at the battalion and brigade level.

forces the ability to fight the insurgents, however. In the past, similar modernization programs met failure when, in the end, a simple deficiency of the will to confront the communist insurgency doomed the territorial forces no matter what their theoretical capabilities.

Over the course of 1969, Regional Forces companies in Thua Thien demonstrated increasing motivation to protect their homes and their neighbors from the insurgents even as the 101<sup>st</sup>'s direct oversight of their operations lessened. After the preview of communist takeover given in their 1968 Tet offensive, the territorials finally found something to fight for – or against in this case – and the 101<sup>st</sup>'s training and mentoring efforts simply gave the RF and PF the means to fight. Democratization, land reform, loyalty to the ruling clique in Saigon, and the potential for economic development took a back seat to the impetus provided by protecting their native district or village from further violence and control from outsiders. The will to fight could be aided, but not created in Saigon, Washington, or the 101<sup>st</sup>'s headquarters on Camp Eagle.

**“A far more formidable task”:**

**Implications for Future Counterinsurgency**

Nation-states do not typically elect to fight as insurgents because this method of waging war breaks down the rule of law, and the measures taken to both further and counter the insurgent's cause can degenerate into little more than thinly-veiled murder. Insurgency is a strategy of weakness chosen – or resorted to – by groups that seek to topple the existing social order and usually replace it with a new model. Even when the conventional mindset of the existing government's forces make insurgency tactically efficient to furthering their cause, this mode of combat ultimately makes the task of establishing the new order difficult for the revolutionaries. In this environment, the insurgents can survive, but never actually achieve their goals except through political settlement. Sometimes, the insurgents possess little design beyond simply getting rid of

the old existing order. Groups with these negative aims generally lack the cohesion and leadership to organize a conventional army or alternative government.

Thus, states try to avoid social chaos in conflicts by attempting to apply rules limiting war as much as possible to combatants. These rules seek to preserve social order and confine the application of violence as much as possible to the battlefield.<sup>339</sup> If possible, states seek to wage war conventionally with designated armed combatants so that they might steer clear of this chaos and more precisely achieve their goals. Insurgencies happen when the disparities between the capabilities of opposing armies are as great as the desire to overthrow the existing political order. Insurgency, then, is a risky strategy for any group or society resorting to it precisely because when successful it temporarily replaces social order with social chaos before a new order can be imposed, if it can be imposed at all at all.

Each insurgent group has different characteristics which define the methods available to it. The Vietnamese communist insurgency had threads that tied it to a centrally directed ideological and nationalistic leadership in Hanoi, giving it particular strengths and vulnerabilities. When their victory came in 1975, the central direction from Hanoi and decimation of local VC leadership in South Vietnam enabled the communists to rapidly consolidate power and avoid much of the factional infighting and social unrest that characterizes more decentralized movements. During the U.S. and GVN pacification campaign, on the other hand, the communists paid the price for this organization and corresponding need to communicate extensively between higher and lower levels by losing many of their best junior cadre to saturation patrols and identification in captured documents. Other insurgent movements may not have the same tactical vulnerabilities due to their lack of central direction. The long-term price for the short-term expediency gained by organizational decentralization occurs in the

339. In this light, aerial bombing of population centers can be seen – like insurgency – as a strategy of weakness resorted to by nation states when other means of prosecuting war are not effective in achieving desired results. Unlike a counterinsurgency, however, a nation employing area bombing may or may not have a vested interest in preserving the social cohesion of the targeted population.

difficult transition from simple armed opposition groups to an administrative competitor to the existing state. A body of numerous armed groups recognizing no central authority might find it more difficult to reach governing consensus after the unifying threat of the original state is weakened.

The communist insurgency in South Vietnam was unified under a singular chain of command to achieve a singular goal – Vietnamese communist rule over all of Vietnam. This unity of purpose limited the political remedies available to the GVN to win over insurgent groups and gave the VC access to vital support from North Vietnam. The South Vietnamese could not negotiate with individual insurgent cells and regional groups to redress their grievances and internally splinter the insurgency, but this unity and single-mindedness came at a high price as effective GVN pacification programs in Thua Thien stripped the insurgency of all but the most dedicated and fortunate South Vietnamese members. Only in pockets of the Mekong delta, coastal Binh Dinh province in central South Vietnam, and rugged Pleiku province in the central highlands did the VC retain the strength to effectively oppose the pacification program by the end of 1970. In each of these areas, the insurgency existed on life support, propped up by infusions of Northerners into the infrastructure and the physical and psychological menace of the NVA.<sup>340</sup> Other insurgent movements might have more diverse aims and limited desire to pay the price that the Vietnamese communists paid to achieve their goals and thus be more amenable to political, rather than coercive resolutions.

The responsibility of executing these coercive resolutions ultimately and eventually falls on the people and government of the threatened nation if it is to survive. In February 1969, during introductory remarks at a civic action orientation course in Da Nang, Major General Melvin Zais, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division commander, gave some indication of the difficulty involved in developing the South Vietnamese will to counter the insurgents. “Quite frankly,” he said, “winning the people’s loyalty has been a far more formidable task than winning military victories.” The hurdles included an enemy

340. For an account on how the North Vietnamese communists consolidated power throughout South Vietnam after their defeat of the GVN in 1975 see Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986).



who “through a skillful blend of terrorism to erode confidence in the Government of Vietnam, exploitation of failures of previous governments to serve the people, and persuasion that the alternative government they offer is the legitimate government to represent the Vietnamese people and satisfy their aspirations, [was] successful in gaining a grater commitment of loyalty than the GVN.” The GVN’s actions since the partition of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1954 represented another hurdle since the Saigon government until recently tended to continue colonial policies that “had traditionally taken away and had given him [the rural peasant] nothing. His only real contact with the government has been with tax collectors or other enforcers of onerous regulations.” In order to change large-scale apathy and opposition to the existing government, Zais claimed that it must give “tangible indications that the GVN can provide security, a better material life, and social and legal justice.”<sup>341</sup>

The security, political, and economic elements of counterinsurgency which Zais spoke of form the three elements of a more complex notion best described as stability. Like a tripod, each of the three elements of stability is bound with the others and can only advance or decline in relative concert with one another if the structure is to remain upright. In Thua Thien, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne did not deal at all with Vietnamese local political development and made a somewhat greater, though not decisive, contribution to economic development through road-building and direct aid to villages located near their permanent bases. At higher levels the U.S. attempted to influence South Vietnamese political development, but on the ground the 101<sup>st</sup> dealt with the traditional Vietnamese peasant village and GVN military government as it existed. Even with his division’s relatively limited focus on security, the subsequent 101<sup>st</sup> commander, Major General John M. Wright, still marveled at “the complexity of the U.S. effort in support of the

341. Melvin Zais, in Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Operation Nevada Eagle After Action Report Briefing Narrative, dated 1 April 1969,” Introductory Remarks, III MAF Civic Action Orientation Course, 26 February 1969, page 2; Box 1, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Unit History Files, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

Republic of Vietnam.”<sup>342</sup> Economic and political gains should be considered as necessary advancements made to win the hearts and minds of a population and erode support for the insurgents through positive means. The provision of security forms a vital negative corollary to these positive political and economic aims.<sup>343</sup> Security is the ability to keep those whose hearts and minds cannot be won through positive action from acting to disrupt these positive aspects of stability.

Creating and preserving stability is a daily task conducted by a government over an indefinite period of time and not a singular campaign or battle. A weak government may require extensive external support in any or all three areas to sustain stability and external support levels may fluctuate according to conditions present from region to region. Insurgencies and counter-insurgencies take much time and effort for either side to win unless the existing government is willing to make extensive political concessions to salve insurgent demands, or the insurgents have a weak internal and external support base. In the meantime, simply defining the difference between success and defeat can be problematic.

As General Wright discovered during Operation Randolph Glen, “the only significant problem encountered, and one which requires more work and effort to resolve, is that of measurement of progress.” The general “recognized that this problem has been addressed at every level since the beginning of our effort in Vietnam,” but lamented, “it is one that continues.” He realized that “tangible accomplishments can be tabulated and reported” as they had been exhaustively for years without finding the one key measurement to describe success against insurgency. Eventually, Wright concluded that “it is more difficult to measure and report accurately the discernible fact that the net result of this coordinated effort is greater than the sum of the separately identified

342. “Combat After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 7 December 1969 to 31 March 1970; dated 30 June 1970,” p. 21, Box 1, Unit History Files, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, MACV Command Historian’s Collection, MHI.

343. Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S. –Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 220-21. The retired general claims that “against an insurgency movement, pacification can never succeed without military security, while military operations are a waste unless they lead to pacification.”

components,” which could also be said to be true in reverse.<sup>344</sup> Often, the sum of the components added up to more than the net result of coordinated effort.

Measuring the success in a counterinsurgency effort is no less than quantifying the existing government’s effectiveness, a difficult measurement even in an established nation at peace. Tests provided by natural disasters, internal upheaval, and war yield the true answers to a government’s effectiveness, but the final verdict can take years to discern. In the meantime, there are no precision-guided munitions, blitzkrieg operational equivalents, or elite commando forces capable of cheaply imposing state authority over a portion of the population in revolt, just as there are no rapid and total legislative solutions to significant and divisive domestic political issues, and responsible military leaders should never promise such capabilities or results. There simply are no painless or easy solutions to ending an insurgency.

Typically, many Americans have wanted to think of war as an aberration, to be waged with unlimited resources for a sufficient length of time in order to achieve victory. In campaigns where the nation’s goals were unclear or defined as something less than total defeat of the enemy, this traditional way of war was amended to creating the illusion of peace by simply waging war with limited means determined largely by the desire to avoid the complete mobilization of the American people and economy. Success in counterinsurgency, as the communists showed in Thua Thien, requires a different formulation for war that Americans have not embraced, their army seems ill-prepared for, and their politicians have not found agreeable – applying sufficient force over indefinite time.

<sup>344</sup> Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, “Combat After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, 7 December 1969 to 31 March 1970; dated 30 June 1970,” p. 21. Also see Chapter IV, pages 87-196 for an account of Operation Randolph Glen.

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Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3

After Action Reports

Command Reports

Operations Planning Files

##### 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade

Assistant Chief of Staff, S3: Operations Planning Files

Assistant Chief of Staff, S3: After Action Reports

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Operations (G3) Advisor Files

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1-327th Infantry Battalion: Operations Planning Files

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101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division

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9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division

11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment

23<sup>rd</sup> (Americal) Infantry Division

173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade

Misc. Advisory Team After Action Reports

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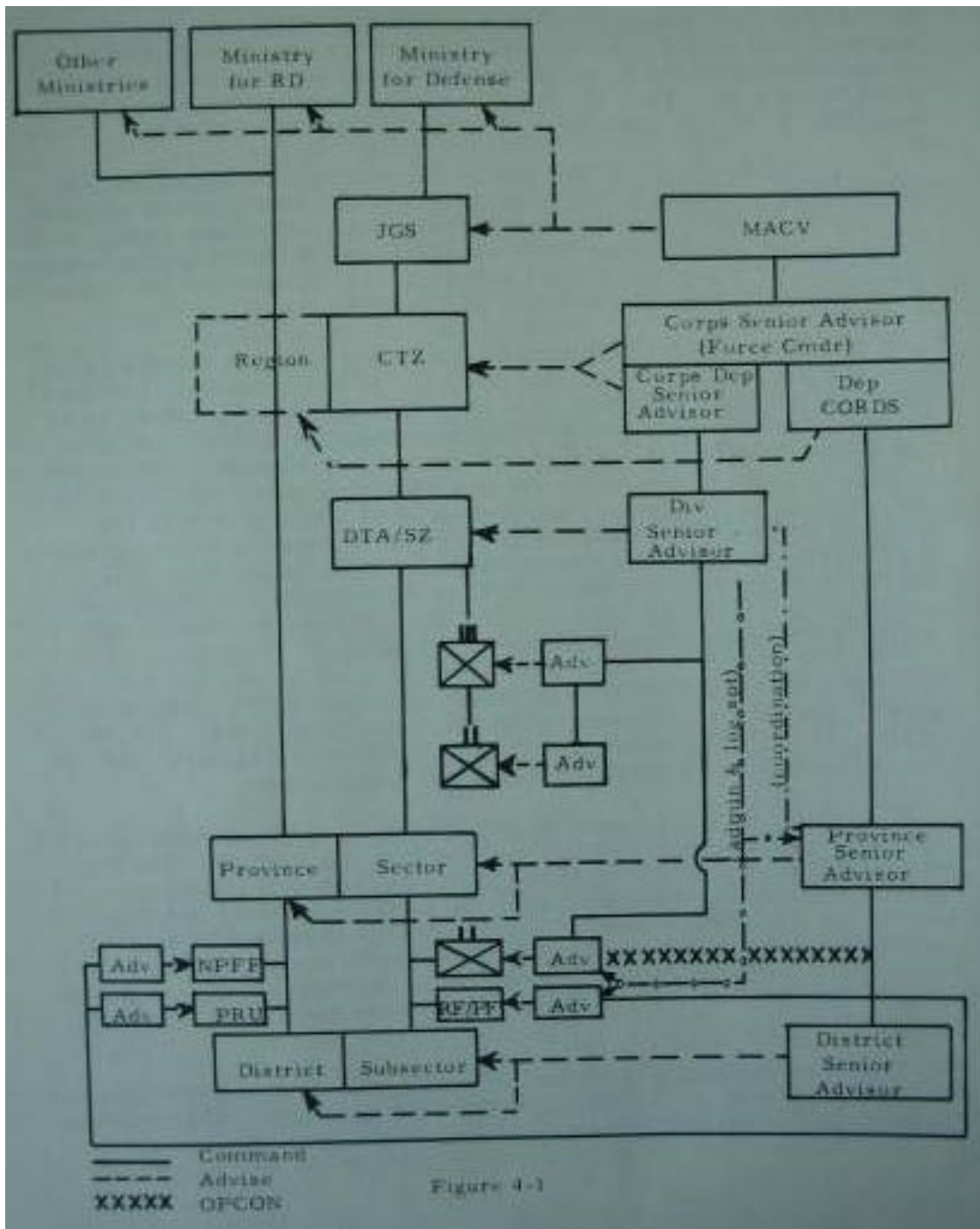
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**APPENDIX A**  
**THUA THIEN DISTRICT MAP**



Source: Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle; Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 150.

**APPENDIX B**  
**MACV ADVISORY ORGANIZATION**



Source: Hq., Department of the Army, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1968), 36, Box 186, Organizational History Files, Military Historian's Office, Records of HQ, U.S. Army, Pacific, RG 550, NARA II.

**APPENDIX C**  
**101<sup>st</sup> AIRBORNE DIVISION EMPLOYMENT OF RIFLE PLATOONS,**  
**SPRING 1970**



RIFLE PLATOON AVAILABILITY

	JAYS AVAILABLE	CAMPY	LOWLANDS	OTHER
1-327	1300	859	264	177
2-327	1565	26	1424	115
2-502	1264	1064	6	194
1-501	1380	861	248	271
2-501	1423	1339	3	81
1-502	1447	1011	333	103
3-187	1444	20	1252	172
1-506	1487	1302	0	185
2-506	1822	1534	14	274

Source: Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "After Action Report: Operation Randolph Glen, dated 15 April 1970," Rifle Platoon Availability Chart, Box 1, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

**APPENDIX D**  
**THUA THIEN PROVINCIAL FORCES, 1970**



DISTRICT	RF Co Gp		RF Co		PF Flat		Org		PSDF (Individuals)		Armed		NFFF		APT*		Intel PHU**	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
PHU LOC	2	2	11	20	21	9501	1021	2350	2350	2350	2350	2350	46	47	15	2	13	
VINH LOC	0	0	0	0	17	3333	8539	2658	1916	1808	2298	0	0	0	8	1	9	
PHU THU	1	1	7	6	12	3210	6691	541	771	620	771	63	63	15	1	12		
HUONG THUY	1	1	5	5	28	9398	9289	5138	5318	2323	2310	45	45	7	1	5		
HUONG TRA	1	1	5	5	26	10101	10861	5877	7566	6877	7566	62	62	9	1	5		
PHU VANG	0	0	1	0	23	27361	27731	5569	5569	5000	5000	66	66	7	1	8		
NAM HOA	0	0	3	3	8	787	1210	572	458	572	458	45	45	6	1	2		
QUANG DIEM	0	0	2	3	26	11969	12457	2677	2783	2677	2579	48	48	9	1	10		
THONG DIEM	1	1	6	7	10	4156	4356	1052	1052	791	791	65	66	11	1	10		
HUONG DIEM	0	0	1	0	18	1506	1950	1459	1565	721	938	0	0	6	1	4		
HUE	0	0	1	2	0	15909	16983	9222	7376	6685	7506	66	66	86	1	20		
TRNG CENTER	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	6	6	43	43	189	97227	99086	37915	37322	30224	32565	422	424	179	115	98		

(1) as of 1 Apr 70  
 (2) as of 5 Sep 70

\* - Armed Propaganda Teams  
 \*\* - Provincial Liaison Unit  
 Figures shown denote numbers of personnel.

Source: Hq., 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, "After Action Report: Operation Texas Star, 1 April 1970 to 5 September 1970; dated 23 September 1970," Enclosure 2 (Territorial Forces of Thua Thien Province) to Enclosure 1 (Task Organization), Box 2, After Action Reports, Assistant Chief of Staff, S-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, RG 472, NARA II.

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