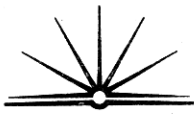


The military strategies and tactics used by soldiers on both sides in Vietnam between 1960 and 1975 were eventually revealed to be one of the key factors in the victory of the North Vietnamese Army & National Liberation Front (including the Viet Cong) over the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the infantry of the United States Army. In considering this question, we must examine the air campaigns and search and destroy missions executed by the US and ARVN, the communist insurgency from 1960 to the outbreak of open war, the guerrilla tactics employed by the VC and the large-scale offensives (Tet and the Spring offensive) launched by Hanoi.

Following Lyndon Johnson's re-election in November 1965, the Gulf of Tonkin incident (several days prior) had provided the justification and impetus to launch the already planned Operation Barrel Roll, the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail. This was the first public military manoeuvre, although covert operations had been taking place for some time by the USA, ^{Congress remaining} unaware. A simulated war game in the USA revealed that carpet bombing the



North (Operation Rolling Thunder) would have limited, if any significant impact on the activity of the DRV. This evaluation turned out to be true. Johnson said in hindsight "This war will never be won from the air" and he was correct. Despite the intense bombing of the H.C.M. trail that resulted in the loss of 200 B52 bombers, an enormous flow of men and materials continued, with female construction crews quickly repairing bomb damage along the trail. The determination of the VC is important in assessing why the bombing raids were so ineffective. The extensive bombing of northern industrial targets at several points during the war was effective in placing diplomatic pressure on the DRV (Operation Linebacker Two forced the DRV ambassador, Le Duc Tho, to return to peace talks in 1973), but little else: enormous destruction ensued but because of the nature of the guerilla war waged by the VC in the South, the impact on the conflict was limited. Civilian fatalities were minimal, because of mass evacuations, but 3 million refugees were created (which helped to launch a home-front backlash against the American War in Vietnam). Extensive air campaigns were

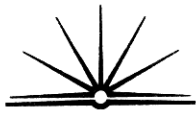
Operation Menu, the bombing of communist bases on the Cambodian border, pushed the communists further into Cambodia, with disastrous consequences for both the US and Cambodia.

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Therefore largely ineffective as a strategy in the 2nd Indo-Chinese conflict.

The Search and Destroy operations launched by the Americans, such as Operation Cedar Falls or Operation Junction City in 1967 were designed to locate VC spheres of influence, destroy them, and thus remove the present base of support for the communist insurgents. Operation Cedar Falls was one of the largest of the war. Initial contact on the ground in a located area would be followed by air support with napalm and defoliants to clear the jungle and destroy crops. Tunnel systems would be mined and blown up. The infantry would return to confront or capture any survivors. Such as Cedar Falls, which took place in the Bien Hoa province, at first ~~it~~ seemed to be a success, but within two months the VC had reoccupied the area. Search and destroy missions were of limited effectiveness on anything more than an immediate time scale, since the USA forces could not solve the problem of securing an area, then maintaining that security without tying up an enormous number of troops.

It is therefore clear that although the USA air

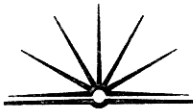


campaigns and search and destroy missions caused 900,000 VC and NVA casualties by the end of the war, they were largely ineffective as military strategies and tactics, because of the nature of the war being waged in the South by VC cadres and NVA platoons.

The insurgency of the VC (following a decision ^{revolutionary} to use force and violence to remedy the country at the 15th Party Plenum in 1959) ultimately caused open war, but was an extremely effective strategic tactic.

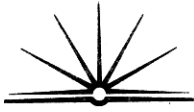
The assassination campaign quadrupled in number of deaths from 1200 /y in 1956 to over 4000 in 1960. This was effective because the backlash by Ngo Dinh Diem further alienated those under his regime. The Agroville Plan and Strategic Hamlets Plan, designed by Diem + the USA to remove the VC's peasant base of support, in fact further alienated the peasants, removing them from ancestral land, and producing more support for the NLF and VC.

The Viet Cong's tactics and strategies in the South, modelled on Mao Ze Dong's principles of guerilla warfare, were the most effective of the war. Whereas in US plans, new arrivals were sent to fill gaps left



by deaths or casualties, thus breaking down any cohesion or sense of unity that may have existed. The VC cadres worked as three man cells, with each individual responsible for his two friends. These tight groups worked in a difficult environment that they were familiar with. The US forces, by contrast, were in an alien world of dense jungles and noisome heat and storms, a culture they didn't understand, fighting an enemy they often couldn't see. This frustration and tactics involved itself in atrocities such as the My Lai Massacre, which ironically caused more support for the end of American involvement in what many perceived as a Vietnamese civil war.

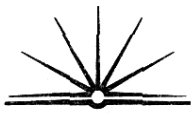
The failure of the large offensives launched by the communists affirms the argument that guerrilla tactics were the most effective strategies used by soldiers in Vietnam (some Australian units were well adapted to this, using their experience in Malaya.) The Tet Offensive of 1968 was, as Michael Lynch says, 'a devastating military setback for the communists.' The USA were used to such large offensives, and thus prevented the



Communists from achieving their main objective - to spark an uprising in the urban and rural South.

General Gray, speaking with Stanley Karnow, downplayed the military failure, emphasizing the psychological victory, arising from the negative media attention in the West (Walter Kravchik, the NBC news anchor, said of the horrible images of Tet that 20 million Americans saw, 'What the hell's going on here? I thought we were winning this war!') General Tran Do provides a rare balanced viewpoint - 'we failed in our original objectives... through underestimation of the opposition... and our own subjective desires... but the media attention was an added bonus'. The other large communist offensive, the Spring Offensive, has been debated in purpose. Was it an attempt to improve the communist position at the bargaining table, or a genuine attempt to crush the South, weakened by the withdrawal of their US allies? Regardless, the offensive was a failure, despite early successes by NVA units in the central highlands.

The most effective of US operations was Operation Phoenix, a deadly effort to round up VC



infiltrators and supporters. The operation was a huge success, with 10,000 communists gathered up (6000 were killed), improving the bargaining position of the USA.

An elderly Vietnamese gentleman said in 1996 that 'The Americans never held more than 50m either side of highway one.' While this is a considerable exaggeration, it sums up the effectiveness of the military strategies and tactics used by soldiers in Vietnam.

The large scale bombing campaigns by the USA such as Operation Flaming Dart and Rolling Thunder were limited in effectiveness, and ultimately spread the war into Cambodia, with disastrous consequences. The large-scale military operations on both sides, too, proved to be ineffective in the face of the guerrilla warfare waged by VC cadres in the South - these strategies and tactics ultimately won the war.