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Huey UH-1D, the main troop-carrying helicopter, flying across the plateau country near Pleiku. (Photo by Travis Blaylock; used with permission.)

Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure

by Robert J. Graham

OUR involvement in Vietnam has often been analyzed to discover what went wrong. Theories range from the belief that we should never have intervened to the other extreme, that we should have used whatever force was necessary to win. Probably no one has been able to view our role there with complete objectivity. Having been a squad leader and platoon sergeant in a rifle company in the 4th Division, having been retired from the service owing to wounds received in Vietnam, I certainly cannot exempt myself from bias either. Nevertheless, as a foot soldier, a "Grunt," I can offer a different perspective on the war, suggesting some of the problems encountered while serving in the Central Highlands from 1969 to 1970.¹ Even though the Grunt rarely was conversant with the broad picture, many of the factors others have cited as contributing to our failure manifested themselves in the operations he was ordered to conduct.

In 1969, the 4th Division was responsible for a huge Area of Operations (A/O) in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. The A/O ran west to east from the Cambodian/Laotian border to An Khe, and north to south from Dak To to Ban Me Thuot, an area roughly 85 by 140 miles. This was largely hill and plateau country, marked by mountains and heavy vegetation. There were few roads. Pleiku, Kontum, and Ban Me Thuot were the only real cities in the region. The rest of the Highlands was almost inaccessible and lightly populated, mostly by Montagnards.² This rugged terrain allowed the Communists to operate with relative immunity when dispersed (they normally only concentrated for attacks). It was difficult to spot them from the air or the ground, hard to obtain intelligence on their movements from the area's few inhabitants.

The Highlands were strategically important to both sides. Communist control of the region would cut South Vietnam in

half (their victorious offensive in 1975 started here). Originally, the American task was to prevent that from happening. By 1969 our role had broadened: assist the South Vietnamese in keeping as much of the area under friendly control as possible while still trying to prevent enemy infiltration through the territory into the more heavily populated coastal areas.

Because the enemy controlled much of the Highlands, parts of the Division A/O were classified as Specialized Strike Zones (better known as Free-Fire Zones). Regions under South Vietnamese domination were designated as "Pacified Areas." In such secure districts we were restricted as to how we could engage the enemy, since the people were presumed friendly. In Specialized Strike Zones, everyone was considered the enemy, all friendly civilians supposedly having been relocated in government controlled sectors.

For the average soldier this meant that in Free-Fire Zones, he could shoot first, not wait to be fired upon. Most Grunts preferred operating in these zones: there was no problem in trying to determine who was the enemy — everyone, men, women, children, could be considered such; you could not be held responsible for firing on innocent civilians since by definition there were none there. In "Pacified Areas," the soldier had to wait for the enemy to shoot first, then determine his target before opening up (difficult since, at a distance at least, Vietnamese and Montagnards, friend or foe, all looked alike to the men in my unit).³ Survival in combat often hinges on snap decisions. The soldiers I served with preferred to fire immediately upon sighting movement (to hesitate could be a fatal mistake); in Specialized Strike Zones, they could. Furthermore, fire support such as artillery could be used without worrying about inflicting civilian casualties. One day a helicopter supporting us fired into a tiny village we could not see from the ground. When we

reached the hamlet, we found a blood trail, though we never discovered who was hit. That was, however, the nature of operations in Free-Fire Zones.

Opponents of the war criticized this policy, charging that it demonstrated a callous disregard for the lives of civilians. These critics were not, however, in Vietnam. The soldier in the bush wanted most of all to get home alive; he could not afford to have too tender a conscience. This does not make him a "baby killer." None of the men I knew deliberately shot at civilians; many even feel guilty about having had to kill enemy soldiers. Hence their preference for Specialized Strike Zones, where the chances of injuring innocents were minimized.

Because of bad connotations associated with the phrase Free-Fire Zone, the military insisted on using the official term, Specialized Strike Zone. To little avail. Men in my unit always called such areas Free-Fire Zones. Perhaps it was, as critics charged, a questionable doctrine, but the infantrymen didn't think so at the time. The fact that the Highlands were sparsely populated did at least ease the moral dilemma for the average soldier since there really was little chance of injuring innocents in those areas designated Specialized Strike Zones.

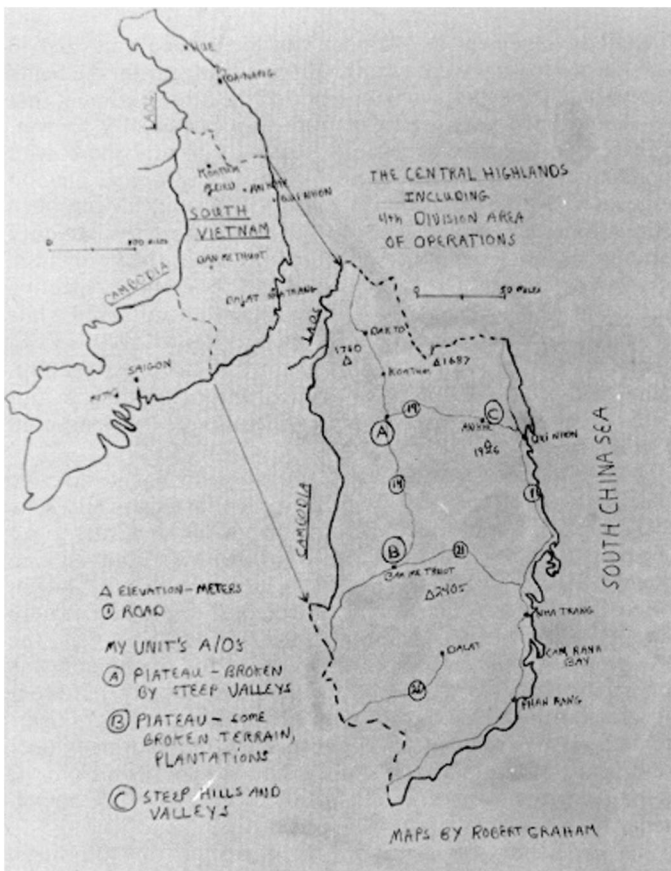
The 4th Division was stretched pretty thin to even begin to cover its A/O. An American Division in Vietnam in 1969 numbered perhaps 20,000 men.⁴ Most were not combat soldiers but rather support personnel. The number of infantry actually available for fighting might at best be 4,000, hardly adequate. At our peak strength in 1969, we had 549,000 Americans in Vietnam. Many individuals have questioned why that many men, coupled with our awesome technology, did not suffice to win. Victory was not, however, just a simple matter of numbers and technology. The 549,000 figure was very misleading because the American Armed Forces operated with a huge logistical tail. For every Grunt in the field, there were approximately seven men in the rear supporting him.⁵ These included cooks, clerks, supply people, maintenance men, truck drivers, military policemen, entertainment personnel, headquarters' staffs, and men running PXs. There were also combat support personnel such as artillerymen and pilots, who often saw action, but were not Grunts. Thus, out of a total of 549,000 Americans, there were at best 70,000 infantrymen. Many of these logistical people were necessary. Still, there was too much "fat" in the American Military machine. It could have functioned effectively without some of this support.

THE men in my unit were almost all draftees from working class families. They were not anxious to be in Vietnam; they were not versed in strategy, tactics, or military history. Still, most had enough common sense to question the above policy, especially after a few visits to the rear (base camps). There, they were amazed at the number of servicemen who were not combat soldiers. They didn't know about the seven-to-one ratio; they did know they were always understrength in the field partly because there were too many in the rear. That was the lavish American way of war in Vietnam, a system, that, once established, evolved its own rationale.⁶ There were a few attempts to alter it, but the system persisted.

If our commanders were aware of this discrepancy they gave us no indication. They were more likely to focus on the number of infantry battalions they could place in the field, the volume of firepower available for support, the overall strategy to be employed. There existed a vast gap between their perception of the war and that of the foot soldier. The fact that my platoon never had the 30-plus men it was supposed to have, and operated with two squads instead of three, might not have been known by even our Battalion Commander, much less by officers at higher levels.⁷ Even so, someone should have seen the need for a change. In Vietnam there were never enough infantry battalions to fully suppress the Communists.⁸ While America and its allies did have a considerable edge in total manpower over the enemy, the "foxhole strength," the infantrymen both sides could put in

the field, was close to a one-to-one ratio. In this category, the Americans, by themselves, were usually outnumbered by the VC and NVA. For example, in mid 1968 the total allied strength of 1,593,300 far exceeded the enemy's 250,000 men. Yet, since a very large percentage of their soldiers were infantry as opposed to only 14 percent of the allied total, the Communists were nearly equal to us in this key aspect.⁹

Without the necessary manpower, reluctant to fully commit what we had because of the heavy casualties that would result, we relied heavily on firepower — helicopter gunships, artillery, and air strikes. It was standard practice for American units upon contacting the enemy to sit tight and summon fire support. My training in the states had emphasized using fire and maneuver to close with your opponent; in Vietnam, my Company did not do this. Instead, we radioed for artillery or gunships as soon as contact was made; with few exceptions, there was no maneuver. This accorded with soldiers' natural tendency to assume a defensive posture when being fired upon; it also minimized American casualties. It was not, however, very successful. The Communists often broke contact before our fire support could arrive, the rough terrain concealed them (making accurate spotting of artillery fire difficult), and the weather often kept our air support grounded. The need to be within range of friendly artillery restricted American movements; also the lavish use of firepower in populated regions may have caused civilian casualties. American commanders longed for the day when the enemy could come out in the open and wage a conventional war, where we could presumably destroy him with our technology. But our foe rarely played into our hands in this manner. My unit almost never sighted the enemy, even when engaged in a fire-fight! Firepower thus had severe limitations in Vietnam. This, coupled with our shortage of infantry, suggests that the picture many had of the war — one of the ample American strength confronting a relatively primitive enemy — was quite misleading. My outfit, for instance, mostly encountered NVA



Map by the author.

soldiers who substituted skillful tactics and knowledge of the terrain for technology.

The 4th Division had three brigades, each containing three infantry battalions. In addition, there were armored, aviation, and artillery battalions, plus numerous support elements. While an infantry battalion was supposed to number 900 men, the one I served with never approached that figure.¹⁰ By 1969, battalions were organized with four rifle companies, a Recon Platoon, Headquarters personnel, an artillery battery of six 105-mm howitzers, and heavy weapons (mortars and recoilless rifles). A battalion was thus fairly well equipped to function on its own, the way mine normally operated. The average infantryman (a fortunate battalion might have 400 Grunts) had little contact with anyone outside his battalion. The men in my outfit hardly knew what brigade we were in, much less what functions the brigade leadership performed, such as coordinating the activities of its three battalions, even though they might be in widely separate locations.

Division headquarters was located at Pleiku; its nine infantry battalions were shifted about to guard key areas or to search for the enemy. These units were thus termed maneuver battalions, what a division commander tried to work with. Nine did not suffice to cover the 4th's A/O, but by 1969, with the advent of Vietnamization, that was not as great a problem as it might have been earlier. This policy, tentatively started under Johnson and continued under Nixon, was essentially one of disengagement for the Americans; the South Vietnamese were to assume greater responsibility for the fighting while we gradually withdrew from Vietnam. Since 1965, Americans had frequently complained that they were doing all the fighting which should have been South Vietnam's responsibility. If partly true in the past (many in my unit still believed it to be the case), this was changing. Thus, 4th Division units were rarely sent into enemy strongholds, while the South Vietnamese moved into the field to engage the Communists. When my Battalion went to Ban Me Thuot, our original job there was security, freeing our allies for field maneuvers. Since this was also a phase in the war when the enemy was not mounting any major offensives, the fighting, for us at least, was generally low level combat, reduced to small unit skirmishes, usually of short duration. Still, the battalions were in the field, and the enemy was, as always, present; while there might be no major battles, a soldier could nevertheless end up getting killed or maimed (one of the realities of Vietnam you could never escape no matter where you were).

EACH battalion had its own method of operation; these followed division guidelines, though individual unit commanders could alter them to some extent. An aggressive Battalion Commander, a gung ho Company Commander, could make a difference as these men's units would normally see more action than others. Poorly led outfits might see little action, or perform unsatisfactorily when they did encounter the enemy. In either case though, there was an S.O.P. (Standard Operating Procedure) that everyone was intended to follow. Understrength though we were, we still might have been successful following an S.O.P. that worked. Ours didn't, at least not by the time the strategy and tactics devised at higher levels had been transformed by the reality of operating in the field. All levels of the chain of command could be faulted for this, though the foot soldier, and the South Vietnamese, paid the primary price for the failure.

Many have noted that one of our key difficulties in Vietnam was the inability to devise a workable strategy, one which commanders and infantrymen could follow in a coordinated fashion with some hope of achieving success.¹¹ Part of the problem lay in defining "success": was it how many enemy soldiers were killed, how much land you controlled, what percentage of the population was pacified, or something else? During the years of our heaviest involvement in the war, we largely pursued a strategy of attrition. The underlying idea was

simple: if you could kill enough enemy soldiers, they would run out of men eventually and give up (somewhat akin to Grant wearing down Lee in the last twelve months of the Civil War). To apply this in Vietnam, American units were sent into the field to engage enemy forces; such operations were frequently termed Search-and-Destroy missions. If the enemy could be found, then, hopefully, our superior firepower would destroy him. Done often enough, the Communists should reach a point where they could no longer continue the war — or so went the reasoning.¹²

It didn't work.¹³ One reason was that attrition can cut both ways, as in World War I. By trying to wear down the enemy, Americans might incur unacceptably heavy casualties themselves, which would agitate the anti-war elements back home. Further, when American units moved into the field in search of enemy units, the Communists often infiltrated into relatively secure areas, seriously undermining the pacification program. Then, if we fought the enemy in populated regions, extensive use of our firepower could kill civilians. Following the attrition strategy thus helped turn American public opinion against the war, often made the countryside less secure, and alienated the very people we were supposed to be helping — losing the battle for "the hearts and minds of the people," which some saw as the key to winning or losing the war.

The military has argued that part of the problem was the restrictions Washington imposed on them, specifically not letting them go after the "heart" of the enemy, his supply lines and bases in Cambodia and Laos, plus his homeland, North Vietnam.¹⁴ Certainly, some dubious shackles were imposed on our Armed Forces, such as letting only the White House select targets that could be bombed during Johnson's Rolling Thunder Campaigns.¹⁵ On a local level, we once defended a fire base flanked by an unoccupied, French owned plantation which we were not allowed to fire into, even if the enemy was there. Mostly, however, these arguments weren't meaningful to the average infantryman, though he might have liked to see North Vietnam "bombed back into the Stone Age," or anything else that would get him home quickly and safely. What the Grunts had to face was the actual strategy and tactics being followed by the Armed Forces, not the policies the Generals would have liked to pursue. It was a flawed method of operations the soldiers were saddled with.

When General Abrams replaced General Westmoreland in charge of American forces in Vietnam, there was supposedly a shift in strategy, downplaying attrition. This tied in with Vietnamization. There was less emphasis on killing the enemy, more on pacification. In 1969, Washington made its top priority the reduction of American casualties.¹⁶ However, out of habit, or in lieu of coming up with anything else, the old attrition policies lingered. American units were still sent on Search-and-Destroy Missions, though that term might not be officially used since, like Free-Fire Zones, it had bad connotations. Unofficially, attrition remained in force.

In the field, the difficulties associated with attrition multiplied. Finding the enemy (essential to Search-and-Destroy) in rough terrain, in a war with no front lines, proved exceptionally difficult. The Army relied on the helicopter to overcome problems of time, distance, and terrain.¹⁷ While these machines helped in many instances, the reliance was excessive — almost to the point of becoming the foundation for everything we did in my Battalion. There were drawbacks to using helicopters, some which the foot soldier could readily perceive. Relatively slow machines vulnerable to ground fire, they consumed large quantities of fuel, and required hours of maintenance to keep them flying — thus adding to our already oversized logistical element. Noisy, their arrival in the field always tipped off the enemy to a unit's location. No matter how often or how far you moved by helicopter, you could rarely conceal all your operations from the Communists.

Being resupplied every four days (often more frequently)

always revealed your presence in an A/O. When I joined my unit, Battalion was flying out hot meals and beverages (once even ice cream) almost daily. This was probably done to maintain morale; I can think of no other justification. Though this practice was thankfully curtailed, we later went through a period when we were ambushed the day following each helicopter visit (not all these drops were requested or necessary). In one case we were told to expect a mail delivery in ten minutes, insufficient time to properly secure an LZ, especially with only 22 men (the numbers problem). The mail and an SP pack (cigarettes) we received actually belonged to another platoon (even with all the men in the rear, such misadventures were commonplace). Then we were told to hike to another LZ for extraction from the A/O the day after. Because of that pointless flight, our position was compromised and we paid a price (the enemy was alerted to prepare an ambush). If this were an isolated instance, one could perhaps excuse it; unfortunately, it typified many of our operations.

Yet there were times when we needed choppers but couldn't get them for whatever reason (weather, lack of suitable landing zones, availability of helicopters — we rarely were told). This happened when we ran out of food or water, sometimes both; it happened when we were ordered to move to a new location. Perhaps we could not have operated in Vietnam without helicopters, but viewing the war from a Grunt's perspective, they unquestionably were more of a hindrance than a help to my outfit.

HELICOPTERS may have supplied mobility, but the task of locating the enemy was still primarily the job of the foot soldier. Accordingly, companies were often sent into the field simply with the hope that they would stumble on, or attract, Communist forces. The mission was not stated as such, but the foot soldier could draw his own conclusions — he felt he was being used as "bait."¹⁸ Even if we located enemy soldiers, they could usually disengage from a fight, withdrawing into the bush (the logical move, preferable to waiting for our fire support to arrive). Their ability to avoid discovery, or disengage, allowed the Communists to retain the initiative. The vast majority of combat actions that took place in Vietnam were started and terminated by them.¹⁹ Hence they determined the ebb and flow of combat, keeping their casualties at a tolerable level, where they would not run out of soldiers. This defeated the purpose of attrition.

When my battalion was sent into a region, its activities centered on a Fire Support Base, whose location largely deter-

mined where we operated. A base was a large establishment, preferably in open, easily defensible terrain. Artillery and heavy mortars were located here to support the rifle companies as they searched for the enemy. In theory, one could picture the Battalion A/O as a circle, with the fire base at the center, the radius of the circle equal to the range of the artillery, say 12,000 yards. Our range of maneuver could, however, be extended by setting up small, temporary bases, called hipshoots, flying in the necessary heavy weapons.

We operated with three rifle companies in the field, the fourth guarding the fire base. The companies rotated, spending two to three weeks in the bush for every one defending the base. Frequently, the Battalion would receive orders to move to a new location; there a base would be built if one weren't already available. In the hundred days I served before being wounded we had three different A/Os: Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, and An Khe. We spent three weeks in the field in each; during those weeks we moved several times by helicopter. We barely familiarized ourselves with one region before heading for a new one. This policy seems wrong — the enemy was bound to know whatever locale we were in better than we did. Even when my outfit did hit the same area twice (the only instance I know of), the missions were months apart, the method used the second time unsuccessful. In that instance Battalion employed an on-line formation — four companies abreast — to sweep a valley near An Khe where we'd had numerous enemy contacts the first time. This formation, however, practically guaranteed failure against an enemy who operated in small detachments. In two weeks, 400 men recorded no enemy contacts.

That operation was unusual. My company normally maneuvered on its own, though not always as a unit. The three rifle platoons frequently were given separate assignments, enabling us to cover more territory. This part of our S.O.P. made sense, providing the platoons remained in supporting distance of each other. That didn't always happen. Long after I was wounded, my former platoon was ambushed; it fought for hours on its own, help being too far away, losing one-third of its men. Yet the reasons behind having the platoons operate individually (like those underlying the rest of our S.O.P.) were never clearly explained to us. The men I knew instinctively disliked the idea. True, they were aware that in theory units were never truly "alone," since they could summon help ranging from nearby outfits to air strikes. Furthermore, we were told that, if wounded, we would never be more than 20 minutes from a hospital.²⁰ But variables — such as the weather, the number of friendly units in trouble, clamoring for aid — could affect these cal-



Author's unit waiting to board planes at the Ban Me Thuot Airport for a flight to Pleiku. Note the gear carried by the men. (Photo by Travis Blaylock; used with permission.)

culations. To the foot soldier, a platoon was a terribly small number of men to send alone into hostile territory where they might be surrounded (as happened the day I was shot). Logically, some of us could ignore those fears. The average Grunt, however, found it truly frightening to be in the bush with fewer than 30 men, the enemy potentially all about. Everyone knew that occasionally, in spite of our awesome technology, American units had been wiped out (it happened to several LLRP teams — four-man, Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols — in one of our A/Os).

This was perhaps the greatest fear of the common soldier, evidenced by his views on Short Range Reconnaissance Patrols (SRRPs). The company guarding our fire base sent out three of these each night. Four men with a radio travelled one to two thousand meters at dusk, set up along a trail, then stayed there all night to report enemy movement. The SRRPs functioned as an early warning system for the base. The men knew this, but regarded the patrols as being a little short of suicidal; besides, they reasoned, why couldn't we just rely on electronic sensors outside the perimeter instead of risking men's lives. When I joined the Battalion, SRRPs were the first thing everyone warned me about; they all insisted that the 4th was the only unit in Vietnam using them (I doubted that, but many believed it). No one wanted to go on them. My biggest problem in my early days as squad leader was designating the unfortunate "victims"; even though my squad alternated, everyone getting a turn, myself included, the men always complained.

Perhaps the SRRPs were necessary, but they had a negative impact on morale. Some men became machine gunners to avoid going on them (in my unit, gunners, officers, and most sergeants escaped). I led one SRRP that should never have gone out — certainly not in the direction we had to go. The fact that it did helps illustrate the dichotomy between a Commander and a Grunt's view of the war, as well as the danger of blindly following S.O.P. That night our base had a Mad Minute.²¹ Orders called for us to travel 1,000 meters, putting us out of range of friendly fire. An impassable swamp stopped us at 300 meters, well within range. Knowing our Battalion Commander was a stickler for following S.O.P., I did not radio in to request cancellation or change (Lieutenants and Sergeants often had to reconcile on their own differences between what S.O.P. required and what reality dictated). We huddled behind a small mound of earth hoping none of the bullets flying above us during the Mad Minute would ricochet off the branches over our heads. None did, but the experience was enough to make one condemn all SRRPs.

The Grunts hated SRRPs partly because they felt safer when operating with larger units (above platoon size) which were less likely to be overrun. They failed to realize that a company made more noise than a platoon, and was thus more likely to reveal itself to the enemy. The stress, subconsciously or otherwise, was on avoiding contact. The Grunt could ask this: why risk injury when the nation had given up on winning the war? Reduction of American casualties was supposedly granted top priority in Washington; it unquestionably received top priority in the bush.

This was one reason why S.O.P. was rarely scrupulously adhered to; there were others. Division, Brigade, or Battalion, for instance, would institute a mission which placed my rifle company somewhere in the Battalion A/O. Back at high level headquarters, commanders had situation maps to keep track of friendly outfits, known enemy units, plus resulting contacts. These maps might present a neat, coherent picture of the A/O. The reality in the field could be very different.

On a given day the map at Battalion HQ might show my company sweeping from point A to point B (Search-and-Destroy), then setting up ambushes at nights at points C, D, and E — one for each rifle platoon. The map, even if accurate, could not show how difficult it might be to travel from A to B. The actual terrain, thick jungle or bamboo growth, for example

(almost impossible to get through without machetes, yet I spent three months in Vietnam before my platoon received its first machetes), might make it impossible to reach point B in a day. Nor could the map indicate everything we might encounter en route, or how the soldiers would react — especially to having to conduct an ambush that evening after humping all day.

Battalion S.O.P. required companies to set up several ambushes each night; sites for them were often preselected at Battalion by picking grid coordinates on the map. In theory, the best thing to ambush would be a trail the enemy might use. To properly conduct an ambush, everyone had to remain awake. Yet it was illogical to expect men to march all day, carrying 70 pounds of gear through brutal terrain in extreme heat, and then want them to stay up all night, knowing that they would have to hump again the next day! In addition, if we actually reached points C, D, and E, we might find nothing feasible to ambush (this happened at least half the time). When we couldn't locate a trail (it was usually dark when we reached our objectives, allowing scant time for reconnaissance) we opted for setting up a small perimeter in the safest location we could find (though radioing in that we were, in fact, conducting the expected ambush). Even if there was a trail, we couldn't keep more than a few men awake at a time — not enough should the enemy appear. This was the real ambush S.O.P., whatever Battalion may have thought. It was what my Company was doing when I joined; it was what they continued doing after I left.²² I still don't know if Battalion actually believed S.O.P. was being followed, or was aware that a "game" of sorts was being played (a tacit, though subconscious, agreement allowing bending of the rules). Either way, it doesn't speak highly for their leadership or common sense. The latter should have told them that they were asking the men to do the ridiculous, or the impossible.

Another factor which strongly influenced tactics was the morale of the men. They were being asked to fight for a cause their country had given up on by 1969, and they knew it. None were anxious to die. They might alter an assigned mission that appeared risky into one considered safer; this was known as turning Search-and-Destroy into *Search-and-Evade*. The purpose of the average soldier was to survive his year in Vietnam, not find the enemy — which would tend to lessen his chances.²³ Thus, what was planned by the commanders, what was shown on the situation maps, contrasted, often starkly, with what was actually transpiring in the field. Searches were less than diligent, ambushes often nonexistent. In an ironic twist, the official non-attrition strategy, pursued as attrition at command levels in Vietnam, was most definitely *non-attrition* where it counted most, in the bush. It should, therefore, hardly have been surprising when, back at battalion, the situation maps repeatedly showed no enemy contacts for such missions.

BOTH commanders and foot soldiers share some of the blame for this; in Vietnam, as in most wars, the two operated on quite different wave lengths. At times, officers gave the men unreasonable assignments, which they rarely fully explained — we were left to draw our own conclusions about our missions. Had we understood the reasoning behind them, we might have been more enthusiastic. Stonewall Jackson achieved his greatest success without telling his officers, much less his men, what his plans were, but we didn't encounter any Jacksons in our Battalion. The level of leadership I witnessed (from the Platoon to Battalion level) was far from satisfactory. Yet when a unit was fortunate enough to have a good officer (such as my first Company Commander) he would only be with them for half a year, since the military followed a highly dubious policy of rotating officers out of the field after six months, which seriously undermined morale and unit stability.²⁴

This lack of unit stability drastically affected both morale and performance. The make-up of my platoon changed almost weekly, for a number of reasons. There were always men coming and going — home, on leave (R & R), on sick call,

officers reassigned, Grunts getting rear jobs. The fact that officers had six month tours seemed unfair. Yet few foot soldiers served an entire tour in the field either — at some point, they were given rear jobs (safer jobs in cities or on large installations). The average tour in my platoon was probably about eight or nine months — the man I replaced had only pulled six; one of our medics left after one. Some of the rear jobs were necessary, and the policy in effect “rewarded” men who were veterans of the bush. However, for the unit it was detrimental. For instance, after only two months in Vietnam, I had more experience than half the men in my platoon. The Army made matters even worse by allowing Grunts to re-enlist in order to “escape” the field, “bribing” them with a rear job (several from the platoon did that right after I was injured). In the field it meant that units filled with largely inexperienced soldiers were being led sometimes by equally inexperienced officers and sergeants. The roster of a unit fluctuated constantly (we had four vets leave, four new men arrive, on a single day). It was impossible to develop a sense of belonging, esprit de corps, which would have made outfits more effective, and would perhaps have compensated for some of the other problems we encountered.

Good leaders who might have avoided some of the worst aspects of the system were rare. How much intelligence was required to comprehend that men who humped all day could not properly conduct ambushes at night, or that soldiers beating through the boonies with 70-pound loads were not in the best condition for a fight should one develop? Yet many units were expected to do this day after day. Sticking blindly to S.O.P. was not a substitute for leadership, but I saw this done far too often. A little initiative and imagination might have suggested an alternative to having units sweep through the bush every day and set ambushes every night, which was practically what we did. Almost never did we remain in one spot more than 12 hours. Almost never did our presence remain unknown to the enemy for long. This was partly our fault, partly the system's, since a company burdened down by gear cannot move quietly day after day. Even if it could, resupply helicopters would “locate it” for the enemy every few days. We should, instead, have done what at least some American units did, set up in a likely enemy area for an extended period, eschew resupply so as not to reveal our location.²⁴ Then we could have sent out day or night ambushes, whichever worked. The men, not having marched all day, could maintain full alert. In addition, knowing the area, we could have selected the targets rather than relying on Battalion to pick coordinates from a map — about as effective a method as rolling dice. I don't see how this could have failed to be more successful than Search-and-Destroy which, as practiced by my unit, might have covered a larger area, but was ineffective.

A tactic like this could have been readily understood by the men; if it was explained to them, they likely would have carried it out with far more enthusiasm than they did our standard S.O.P. But it was never done in my unit. Instead, with morale slipping badly in the Armed Forces, the country against the war, most men our age sitting safely back in the states, much of what we were told to do appeared incomprehensible, even stupid. To the Grunts, it seemed that they spent most of their time humping aimlessly. With little clear guidance, caring not at all about containment, the domino theory, or the preservation of freedom in South Vietnam, we found scant justification for what we were doing. Since America, and the military, failed to instill in us a sense of purpose, most soldiers accorded survival top priority. Thanks to the one year tours, we didn't have to win the war to return home; we only had to survive.

Thus, any mission that sounded dangerous was seen by the average foot soldier as a threat; this tended to color his performance of that assignment — avoid the enemy if possible, keep your head down and call in fire support if attacked. Yet this was not universally true; some American units still functioned at a high level. Excellent leadership could produce results.

Additionally, even where such guidance was lacking, if a mission made sense, the men would usually perform it willingly enough. Unfortunately, very few of our assignments made sense. Leadership, discipline, morale — intangible factors — are vital if an army is to fight effectively. As the war dragged on with no end in sight, as the people back home increasingly opposed it, the American Armed Forces were losing these qualities. This was not the only reason for our failure in Vietnam but, for the Grunts, it was one of the most important ones. It directly affected all of them as they went through the motions day after day conducting operations which they sensed were irreparably flawed by the very nature of the war and the way the Army conducted it.

Perhaps we never should have intervened in Vietnam, perhaps the politicians and the society back home were most responsible for the end result, but in my view the Army has to shoulder a large share of the blame. Given the parameters of the war, knowing the restrictions which existed, they could have done a better job. True, we never lost a major battle in Vietnam, but the vast majority of the fighting was not on that scale.²⁵ We did lose innumerable skirmishes. Tactics should have been adjusted accordingly. Ignoring every other factor behind our failure, our method of operations alone perhaps made success impossible.

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REFERENCES

1. My own experiences and those of other vets I have known are my primary source for what follows unless otherwise indicated.
2. The Montagnards were primitive people ethnically separate from the Vietnamese, with whom they did not have good relations. Most “Yards,” as many Americans called them, were friendly to us. Many were trained by U.S. Special Forces to fight the Communists.
3. The VC — Viet Cong — often dressed like peasant farmers, blending in with the local population. The NVA — North Vietnamese Army soldiers — generally wore uniforms. The men I knew had a hard time distinguishing between Vietnamese and Montagnards; all were called “Dinks” or “Gooks.”
4. Division strengths varied. Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington: U.S. News Books, 1981), 7, lists the authorized strength of the oversized 23rd Division at 24,163. As units were always below their authorized strength, I have used 20,000 men as an approximate figure.
5. This is an approximation. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1976), 187, contends that only 40 percent of the troops in Vietnam were support troops. This seems far from the mark. For

support of my figure, see Charles R. Anderson, *The Grunts* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1976), xi, and Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), 155-156. Charles B. MacDonald, "The In-Country Enemy: Battle with the Viet Cong," *The Vietnam War* (N.Y.: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979), 147, notes that in 1967, of the 473,200 Americans in Vietnam, only 10.6 percent were combat infantry, while 75 percent were HQ and logistics personnel.

6. Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), 163, notes this tendency.

7. Stanton, 53, lists the authorized strength of a rifle company at 164 men. Mine rarely had more than 100 in its three rifle platoons and one weapons platoon which was usually employed as a fourth, smaller, rifle platoon to provide security for Company HQ. At times, field strength fell to below 80. My platoon averaged 25 men, and, lacking men and leaders, we mostly operated with two instead of the standard three rifle squads.

8. Westmoreland, 147, notes this. Historically this has been characteristic of the American way of war. In WWII, when many have assumed that we had overwhelming superiority, we had barely enough battalions to do the job. See Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 12ff.

9. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1978), 175, calculates this would leave 88,400 allied soldiers opposed to 70,000 VC and NVA. Thomas C. Thayer, "We Could not Win the War of Attrition We Tried to Fight," in W. Scott Thompson & Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (N.Y.: Crane, Russak & Co., 1977), 90-91, states that while we had a 6-to-1 manpower edge from 1967 to 1971 over the Communists, the edge in fighting soldiers was only 1.6-to-1 (or possibly lower owing to the forces we had to maintain on security missions). By 1972 it had declined to 0.8-to-1.

10. Stanton, 53.

11. Summers, 83ff, suggests that we never came up with a strategy at all. Brig. Gen. Douglass Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), 25, found in a survey that "almost 70 percent of the Army Generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives." As quoted in Summers, 105.

12. Westmoreland, 144ff, explains the thinking behind his selection of a strategy, arguing, essentially, that he had no other choice.

13. See Lewy, 77ff. Palmer, 117, describes attrition as the "absence of any strategy." Thayer, in Thompson & Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 85ff, also analyzes some of the reasons for the failure of attrition.

14. Palmer, 110-111, notes the prohibition against attacking North Vietnam — the "one sure route to victory" — as well as criticizing the failure to close the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. Summers, 102ff, feels we focused our attention not on the "source of the war," North Vietnam, but on "the symptom — the guerrilla war in the south."

15. Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), 63ff, discusses this.

16. Lewy, 136-138, outlines the new strategy.

17. Westmoreland, 150, asserts that the helicopter "made it possible to overcome the major obstacles posed by rugged terrain."

18. See sections of James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978). Although a novel, this is based on Webb's extensive combat experience as a Marine infantry officer. The men in my unit also sensed this.

19. Lewy, 83, notes that only a small fraction of allied operations resulted in enemy contact, that most combat was initiated by the Communists. Thayer, in Thompson and Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 88ff, agrees, though noting the initiative shifted more in the allied favor after the TET Offensive. For an opposing view, see Lt. Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1974), 180. This, like other Vietnam studies released by the Department of the Army that I have seen, seems too optimistic about the Army operations it describes.

20. Westmoreland, 299. Sometimes, but we had a critically wounded man wait well over one hour for a helicopter on a clear day. If there was a good reason, we were not told.

21. In a Mad Minute, all soldiers around the perimeter would fire their weapons for at least a minute — with the hope of discouraging enemy attacks.

22. Although a Sergeant, I had to break in as a rifleman the first two weeks until a squad leader position opened up in my Platoon: good for learning the ropes, bad for undermining one's leadership position. New men inevitably learned the method their unit was already following. It was difficult for them to make changes, even if they perceived the problem — which I did not at first.

23. Viewed in this light, the idea of one-year tours may have been a mistake, as it did not necessarily boost morale or add to a soldier's performance. It unquestionably did irreparable damage to unit cohesiveness.

24. Grunts questioned why officers only pulled six-month tours. The idea was apparently to give an officer experience in several jobs. Thus his second six months would be served in some other capacity, staff work rather than field command. Robert L. Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 126-127, ties in the idea of short tours with the persistence of the attrition ground strategy. He notes that one reason why the Army did not learn more and adjust to flaws in the strategy was that rotation limited "the amount of experience individuals could gain" and removed those just mastering their task.

25. Lt. Col. Anthony B. Herbert (with James T. Wooten), *Soldier* (N.Y.: Dell Publishing Company, 1973), 251ff, outlines such a policy which he implemented upon taking command of his battalion. Frederick Downes, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 135ff, describes times when his unit operated in this manner, setting day time ambushes which were successful.

26. Summers, 1, notes that he said this to a North Vietnamese Colonel, who replied that it was true, but irrelevant.