16 January 1968

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Place: Room 6F19, Hqs.

Time: 1400-1600 (approx), 12 January 1968

Present: Colonel Gaines Hawkins, US Army; Samuel Adams, SAVA; Ronald Smith, OER

Background: Colonel Hawkins, gathering material at the CIA for training courses he administers in Fort Holabird, Maryland, agreed to talk to Messrs. Adams and Smith concerning VC Order of Battle problems. Colonel Hawkins had been the head of the MACV OB section between February 1966 and September 1967 (approx).

Discussion:

1. The conversation covered five general subjects:

   (a). VC administrative Services
   (b). VC Irregulars
   (c). VC Population Control
   (d). VC Political OB
   (e). VC Main Force/Local Force OB

VC Administrative Services

2. Colonel Hawkins declared that at the time of the Saigon conference (in September 1967) MACV had only a limited understanding of the VC administrative services. The admin service study (the thick volume presented in Washington to the NIE 14.3-67 meeting in August 1967) was produced in his absence. He indicated it was none too good a job and said that he had been able to point out several omissions in it to its authors.
3. Adams asked what the so-called "independent units" were that had been included in the August admin service study. Colonel Hawkins declared they included such units as transport, signal, and engineer battalions subordinate to regions and provinces. They did not include those integral to VC/NVA divisions.

4. Adams noted that the MACV OB listed—under "Combat Support," (that is, part of the Main Forces, not admin services)—a number of engineer, medical, transport, and signal battalions. (Adams, lacking an OB, speculated there were about three each such battalions integral to divisions.) Adams then noted there were some nine VC/NVA divisions and asked why engineer, medical, transport, and signal battalions were not attached to each. Colonel Hawkins replied that such battalions had not been identified with each division. He noted that the 5th NVA Division had evolved out of the southern subregion (of Region 5). The 5th NVA apparently did not have support battalions like those described.

5. Adams asked how, therefore, the 5th NVA was supported. Colonel Hawkins indicated he did not know, but that obviously it got its support from somewhere. He speculated that the 5th was supported by the local admin support apparatus. He stated the "overall OB picture" was conservative, and that our lack of knowledge of the VC logistic system was one of the reasons.

6. Adams noted that in August Colonel Hawkins had told David Laux of the Office of National Estimates (while at lunch) that he thought there may have been as many as 100,000 admin service troops (as defined at Honolulu in February 1967) in the VC/NVA structure. Adams asked how the Colonel squared this speculation with later figures in the 35,000 range. The colonel said that when he returned to Saigon from Washington and looked at the problem in more detail, he came to feel that the number

* The study listed 34,544 as belonging to administrative service units, broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Service Units</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>10,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>10,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Unit</td>
<td>4,178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>9,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34,544</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was more likely in the 45-50,000 range. There were large numbers of admin service troops at COSVN headquarters and in VC Region I. Large numbers of admin service troops served in all the regions, the colonel stated, and speculated that the Region 5 Admin Service Structure might even be larger than that of COSVN.

7. Adams asked about the various groups subordinate to COSVN (Groups 80-86), and noted that a document listed the number of persons assigned to one of the groups as 1500 (as of early 1966), while the OB listed the same group 1000 strong (in the October 1967 OB). The colonel stated that—at the COSVN level—the size of the admin service groups had been "scaled down."

8. The colonel declared that there had been considerable problems estimating the size of the admin services at province and district levels. Evidence—as then available—was skimpy, and the MACV sample in August was small. He noted that at the Saigon conference their data base at district level was "one."

9. Adams noted that admin service troops serving in Cambodia and Laos were not listed in the OB and asked the colonel what he thought of this situation. Colonel Hawkins stated he thought that admin service troops in those areas belonged in the OB.

10. Adams noted that he had been unable to correlate specific admin service units with the CICV "Base Areas." Hawkins stated that he did not understand how VC "Secret Zones" and "Base Areas" operated and was himself unable to correlate base areas with OB figures. He added that the whole question of VC supply and logistics was fascinating but little understood.

VC Irregulars

11. Colonel Hawkins observed, vis-a-vis VC irregulars, how dissimilar areas were in the evolution of the "irregular" structure. Some provinces were more advanced than others. Mr. Smith observed that the irregular apparatus appeared to vary considerably both in quality and leadership. The colonel concurred. Mr. Smith noted that a military

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* The colonel did not indicate whether his belief that the admin service troops numbered 45-50,000 formed before or after the scaling down of admin service units by MACV.
An official who had served in Go Cong Province had said that there were no self defense militia in Go Cong. The colonel said this did not surprise him.

12. Adams asked the colonel about his travels throughout Vietnam on the irregular problem. (The colonel had gone to several provinces to instruct sector and corps intelligence officers about how to send in their RITZ reports.) The colonel stated that he had inspected provinces in I and II Corps, leaving III and IV Corps to Lt. Kelly Robinson and 2d Lt. MacArthur. He cited the following stops:

(a). In Pleiku, the colonel said, the resident expert was a sergeant who did not know guerrillas from militia or from local force soldiers. The sergeant obtained his RITZ figures from the local CAS man. The colonel indicated he thought the irregular figure from Darlac (while he did not visit) were even worse than those from Pleiku.

(b). The colonel said he thought that the S-2 in Binh Dinh which he visited had turned in a "pretty good" performance.

(c). Figures derived in Khanh Hoa (which he visited) were "mediocre."

(d). In Ninh Thuan (which he visited) there was a "very good captain" who had a good feel for irregulars. He observed the captain was on top of the documents in Ninh Thuan.

(e). The RITZ report from Quang Nam he thought was "good," while that from Thai Phien was "not so good." (He visited both provinces.)

(f). The colonel also visited I Corps headquarters at which Captain Yeoman--now at Fort Holabird--had devised a formula for estimating irregulars. The formula, said Colonel Hawkins, was "shallow" but based on fair evidence. He thought Captain Yeoman was a competent intelligence officer.

1 The RITZ program was designed by MACV to ascertain at district level the number of irregulars throughout the country. RITZ reports are sent from district to province, from province to corps, and from corps to Saigon, where they are compared with captured documents.

2 Yeoman's formula allowed for 25 guerrillas in each VC village and 5 guerrillas in each VC hamlet.
(g) The intelligence component at II Corps, on the other hand, said the colonel, was not as aware of our irregular problem as that of I Corps. He declared that there was "no one at II Corps" concerned with irregulars "who was any good."

13. Adams noted that three VC documents indicated that in early 1966, the number of VC guerrillas was in the 170-180,000 range and that a document of early 1967 vintage suggested that the number of guerrillas then was 150,000. Adams asked the colonel if it would "shock" him if the number of guerrillas was now 120,000. After a short discussion, the colonel guessed that the number of guerrillas was now in the 100-120,000 range. He added that in 1965 and 1966 there were more guerrillas than there are now, and he speculated that the peak in guerrilla strength was "behind us by a year or a year and a half."

14. Asked about the quality of persons in J-2 who worked on guerrillas, he stated that 2d Lt. MacArthur (the MACV irregular expert in September 1967) although improving, was not as good as Captain Price (MacArthur's predecessor). Lt. Col. Perkins (who guided 2d Lt. MacArthur at the Saigon conference) was a "bullshit artist." He added that Lt. Col. Morgan (who presented the MACV case for admin services in Saigon in September was a "nice person to drink with," but was ignorant about admin services.

15. Queried, the colonel declared he was not impressed by the Marine Corps OB in I Corps.

VC Population Control

16. Colonel Hawkins said one of the principle problems of estimating VC strength was population control. An estimate of some months back that put the number under their control at 2 1/2 million he indicated was much too low. The number controlled, he said, was largely a matter of definition. He indicated that although the VC may well have 4 million people under control, "they can influence a lot of others." He stated that in the recent occupation of Hoi An, they recruited "right out of the town," and said the VC probably recruited fair numbers in Saigon itself.

VC Political Order of Battle

17. Queried, Colonel Hawkins said that he believed the Political OB figure was one of the better ones coming out of MACV. The research, he felt, could not be faulted at village and hamlet level.
18. Adams indicated his problems with MACV methodology for counting VC politicians were at district level and above and gave as an illustration a 135-man security section, out of which St. Robinson counted only ten as members of the infrastructure. Colonel Hawkins remarked that Adams's disagreements were probably not so much with the evidence but where to "draw the line" on who to count.

19. The colonel stated that he thought that both Lt. Kelly Robinson (the political OB expert in September) and Captain Sandman (Robinson's predecessor) were good intelligence officers.

The VC Main Force/Local Force OB

20. Queried, Colonel Hawkins declared that a "great many" small sapper (engineer, special action, intel/recon) elements were never counted in the OB. He said that if we had half the sappers identified, we were doing good." He added that in making the statement he was referring to "small units" only.

21. The colonel stated that the MACV OB (prior to September 1967) had contained no area (VUNC) units.

22. Nor had the OB included city units. Specifically excluded were the city units of Da Nang, Hue, and probably Nha Trang. The total number of people excluded by the omission of city units from the OB only amounted to a "few hundred," the colonel stated.

23. Asked whether VC assault youths should be included in the OB, Colonel Hawkins said that he thought they "have to be considered."

24. The colonel stated that one had to be careful in counting Viet Cong. "If you count a lot of these people," he stated, "you are misrepresenting the military threat." Colonel Hawkins had earlier indicated that if you added up everyone organized, you would come up with a figure of 4 million. This, he implied, would be gross misrepresentation of what we were up against militarily. He indicated one of the principle problems in determining the "strength" of the Viet Cong was where to draw the line. Almost everyone in VC territory is involved with their effort in one way or another; some are more dangerous than others. He stated that problems of this sort appeared to be inevitable in "this kind of war."