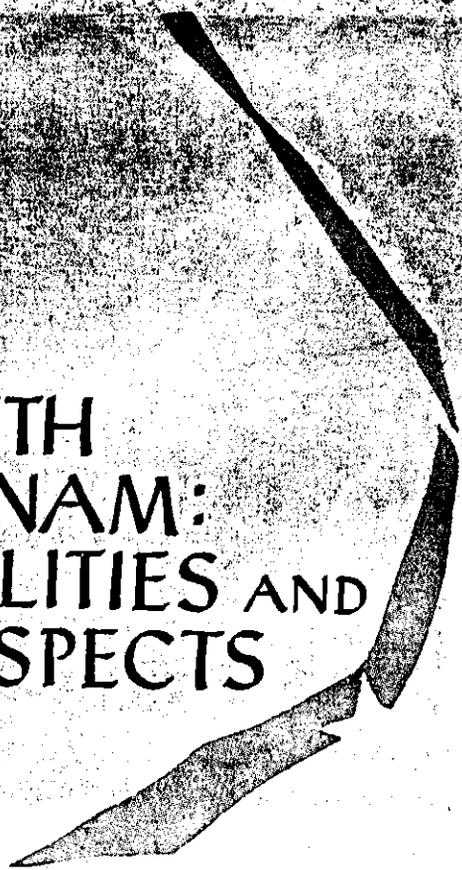


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SOUTH VIETNAM: REALITIES AND PROSPECTS



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US "SPECIAL WAR"

(1961-1965)

In the whole process of US aggression in South Vietnam, the "special war" is the phase which best reveals its neo-colonialist character.

At first, the Americans resorted to a "national" government to cover up their colonialist aims. When they were compelled to launch an aggressive war, they also relied essentially on the native army, supplying it with weapons, money, and "advisers," sending in only a small contingent of their troops, while keeping in hand the direction of the war.

*

In 1960, with the growth of the South Vietnamese revolutionary movement, the political and armed struggle of the masses disrupted Diem's rural administrative machinery, especially in the Mekong delta and on the Western Plateaux. The founding on December 20 that year of the South Vietnam **National Front for Liberation** (NFL) marked a turning-point by rallying the patriotic forces in the struggle against the US-Diem regime.

In 1961, the **People's Liberation Armed Forces** (PLAF) were established. The liberated areas and those where the grip of the enemy had been loosened (1) were extended. The Saigon government was in disarray. An evidence of this was the attempted November 1960 coup. After such a narrow escape, the Diem clique sought to destroy its adversaries while putting up a new façade. Thus it staged a series of "democratic" farces: "presidential elections", "government reshuffle", without the participation of any of its opponents, even pro-US organisations. It also called for more help from the Americans.

In the United States, Kennedy came to power. The "massive retaliation" strategy was replaced by one of "flexible response" to cope with developments in Asia, Africa and Latin America. To quote the Pentagon strategists themselves, the "special war" is a war applying a "flexible" strategy, waged in a favourable conjuncture and in various forms; one must surreptitiously attack, hold enemy territory on the quiet, without noisy proclamation or ostentatious deployment of troops, in order not to provoke any reaction from the American public or world opinion, especially from the socialist camp. With the existence of a powerful socialist camp and the emergence of sweeping national liberation movements, it is dangerous for the imperialists to launch a war of aggression.

In their global strategy, "special war" is on a lower level than "limited (local) war" and "total war". It serves

(1) These are areas in which the enemy administrative apparatus is not yet overthrown but exercises no actual control.

to cope with all people whose political struggle has reached a high level and is boosted by guerilla forces. It aims at crushing the people's armed forces, terrorising and subduing the population and re-occupying areas lost to successful insurrections.

It was Kennedy and Taylor who worked out the political and military instruments of this strategy.

On May 11, 1961, Lyndon B. Johnson, then US Vice-President, was sent to Saigon with a letter from Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem which contained the following points :

— *Increased aid to the South Vietnam civil guard, the mobilisation of which was to be actively carried out to beef up the regular army;*

— *Several missions of US military advisers to help train self-defence units and village militias;*

— *Financial help to add 200,000 more men to the regular army, already 150,000 strong;*

— *Special training in counter-guerilla warfare for the army;*

— *Sending of US army engineers to build and repair communications and airfields.*

On May 13, 1961, a Johnson-Diem joint statement formalized a US-Diem military alliance which was a program of direct aggression against South Vietnam.

Following Johnson's trip, an economic and military mission came to Saigon, led by Eugene Staley, an economist at Stanford University, California.

After one month of painstaking work, Staley drew up a program of action in three stages :

1) "Pacification" of South Vietnam within eighteen months and implantation of "bases" in North Vietnam ;

2) Economic restoration of South Vietnam, strengthening of the puppet army, intensification of sabotage activities in North Vietnam ;

3) Development of the South Vietnam economy, and march on North Vietnam once the Southern regime was consolidated.

On October 18, 1961, Maxwell Taylor, Presidential adviser and the initiator of "flexible response", came to Saigon to study how to intensify the American war effort, including through direct intervention by US armed forces.

Back home Taylor proposed various measures to complete the Staley plan. These were adopted by the US National Security Council on November 15, 1961: to send large numbers of military experts to South Vietnam, to reshape the military command from top to bottom to enable the Americans to control it over the head of the Diem administration, to boost the mobility and strength of the puppet army by supplying it with new weapons, and to launch raid upon raid to herd the population into "strategic hamlets".

He also suggested that measures be taken to introduce into South Vietnam American, Japanese, Taiwanese and SEATO armed forces.

In its decision, the US National Security Council stressed that even more drastic measures could be taken, including intervention by US air and naval forces.

The Staley-Taylor plan provided for a "special war" conducted by the Saigon army under the command of American advisers. US special forces would also take part in the fighting.

This plan had many aspects:

1) The Americans relied essentially on the puppet army staffed by "advisers" down to company and sometimes platoon level. Van Fleet, ex-commander of the US Eighth Army in Korea, had reckoned that a puppet soldier cost twenty-five times cheaper than a GI. The Americans had not yet brought in whole army corps but various US armed services had been introduced. Apart from the puppet army, the strength of which was unceasingly beefed up, the Americans had their own fighting forces, such as air force and special native units in their pay and under their direct command. However, the puppet army played the essential part in the fighting, so that US aggression was well camouflaged.

2) Though sometimes labelled by the Americans mere "counter-insurgency", this "special war" proved to be even fiercer and bloodier than the French aggressive war from 1946 to 1954. Throughout 1961, 1962, 1963 the US-Diem clique deployed from 300,000 to 400,000 men (including the militia) and used from 400 to 500 planes, 200 to 300 M.II3's, hundreds of warships and river craft, and launched each month from 70 to 200 operations sometimes involving up to 10,000 or even 15,000 men, killing and wounding hundreds of thousands of persons.

3) This war combined military with economic, cultural, political and social actions. It was aimed, on the one hand, at killing and repressing people, and on the other, at deceiving and corrupting them in various ways: "open arms", "peace" brigade, etc., while compelling the native people to bear the burden of war expenditures to the greatest extent possible.

4) While launching continuous raids, the US-Diem clique tried their best to herd the population into "strategic hamlets", in an attempt to pen up ten million peasants in concentration camps and in this way cut the people's armed forces from the masses, crush the former and subjugate the latter. That was the crucial point of the Staley-Taylor plan. To concentrate the population and put it under tight control meant to separate the guerillas from their source of manpower and material resources, "to scoop the water away and catch the fish".

5) The US "special war" in South Vietnam was, moreover, an experiment from which lessons were to be drawn for suppressing national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Both Generals Harkins and Westmoreland recognized that South Vietnam was a proving ground for new US weapons and tactics against guerilla warfare.

Military Operations in 1961

In previous years, when the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam had not yet developed and had even receded in some places and at some times, the US

Diem clique had hoped to "fill up the Ben Hai river" (1). They hastily formed big units: nine divisions grouped into four army corps whose task it was to defeat the North Vietnam regular army. To cope with the South Vietnam revolutionary forces, from 1956 to 1960 the US-Diem clique mainly relied on the civil guard, village militia and special police. But since the end of 1960-beginning of 1961, in face of the revolutionary upsurge and the emergence of people's armed forces growing steadily in strength and equipped with weapons captured from US-Diem forces, the enemy had to change their strategic aim and postpone their plan of marching on the North. The 50,000-strong civil guard, the special police, and the village militia with several hundred thousand men were no longer sufficient. The enemy began to mobilise their regular forces.

The US-Diem clique divided the operational theatre into three tactical regions. *First tactical region*: from the 17th parallel to the provinces of Kontum and Quang Ngai; *Second tactical region*: the remaining part of Trung Bo; *Third tactical region*: Nam Bo (excluding the "Saigon-GiaDinh special zone"). Each tactical region was divided into two tactical zones, and each tactical zone into several sectors. Regular forces were sent to these various theatres, and the armed forces in each tactical region were put under a unified command. Many groups of rangers were formed. All the armed forces were trained in counter-guerilla tactics.

(1) Along the 17th parallel. The expression means to conquer the North.

This change in the strategic aim of the US-Diem clique marked a heavy failure for their designs against North Vietnam. But, at the same time, it was the prelude of hard trials for the South Vietnamese people, who now had to deal with a new strategy, extremely cruel and perfidious.

*

According to Liberation Press Agency, in 1960 the US-Diem regular forces mounted about 700 raids, among them 20 large-scale operations from regimental to divisional strength. In 1961, the number rose to 1,000, including 80 big sweeps involving from one regiment to one division, and 400 upward of one battalion. The total number of raids had increased one and a half times, and that of big operations four times. By the end of 1961, when the Staley plan was put into effect, the tempo and scope of the raids escalated even further.

However, throughout 1961 the political and armed forces of the South Vietnamese people kept on developing. In more and more regions, the population succeeded in breaking the enemy's grip:

	1960	1961
— Nam Bo (1,300 communes)	1,000 communes	1,070 communes
— Central and Southern Trung Bo (9,070 villages)		5,100 villages
— Western Plateaux (4,400 villages)		4,000 villages
(Each commune comprises several villages and each village several hamlets)		

Mutinies began breaking out in the enemy's ranks. The French paper *La Tribune des Nations* of September 1st, 1961, disclosed that in August 1961, 65 officers and men were executed for insubordination. Enemy casualties in 1961 amounted to 23,000, outnumbering the recruits (20,000) provided for under the Staley plan for the same year. Nevertheless, Diem still had important possibilities for replenishing and even beefing up his armed forces. Diem and Nhu tried their best to mobilise the "Republican Youth", "Catholic Youth" and levy recruits in some relatively calm regions.

Besides infantry raids, the enemy unremittingly pounded villages with their artillery and air force. By causing permanent insecurity, the US-Diem clique sought to terrorise the population and compel it to move into "strategic hamlets". Starting in 1961 the shellings were ceaselessly intensified. The most savage ones took place towards the end of 1961, when big floods submerged the town of Long Xuyen under three metres of water and that of Chau Phu under five metres, inundating or washing away 200,000 houses. The enemy mercilessly bombed all unflooded villages and his planes strafed boats of refugees in an attempt to concentrate the population and pressgang the youth.

In 1962, the shellings and bombings steadily increased:

- January 1962 : 100 air bombings
- December 1962 : 600 —
- January 1963 : 1,000 —

Artillery shellings were 100 many to be counted.

The population had to struggle at the same time against infantry raids, artillery shellings and air bombings. In most cases, it resorted to mass political struggle. Eluding repression, the people of several communes marched to the towns to hold meetings gathering sometimes scores of thousands of people. There they demanded that the puppet authorities should end the shellings and pay damages to the victims, and denounced the enemy's crimes before the townsfolk. Meanwhile, large crowds besieged and assailed artillery positions; puppet officers and soldiers were surrounded and persuaded to give up repression. This popular struggle took on a strong mass character and reached a high organisational level. There was a real "mass political army" established on a permanent basis. Women played an essential role in these struggles; the long-haired army was able to mobilize millions of people rapidly and continually throughout the country. This mass political struggle literally paralysed the puppet army and administration. It greatly helped the people's armed forces defeat the enemy or thwart his manoeuvres.

In the first stage of the special war, the main form of fighting was raid and counter-raid. There were neither annihilation battles nor protracted engagements. In general, the people's armed forces wore down the enemy by storming his posts, launching night attacks, mounting ambushes or carrying out hit-and-run actions.

However, there were a few major battles: the destruction of Dacha post (Kontum) in September 1961, when the PLAF wiped out 80 men, captured 100 others, seized 100 weapons of various kinds, crushed a reinforcement company and badly mauled another; the raid on Phuoc Thanh chief-town in which the

PLAF put out of action a unit of 170 rangers, captured 100 soldiers, routed a reinforcement ranger unit and seized 400 weapons of various types. Moreover, 300 detainees were set free.

*

The 1962 US - Diem Great Counter-Offensive

1962 was a year full of "important events," the year of the "strategic hamlets", the decisive year of the Staley-Taylor plan, the year of the "great counter-offensive" against the revolutionary movement.

US military aid to Diem in 1962 amounted to 600 million dollars (twice that of 1961; four times that of 1960). That year the Americans sent to South Vietnam more than 12,000 officers, experts and servicemen of various arms, 150 planes, 150 helicopters (on top of the planes put at Diem's disposal), countless M.113's and other war means. In February 1962, they set up in Saigon the MAC (1) under General Harkins, deputy-commander of US forces in the Pacific. The MAC capped the MAAG (2) as well as Diem's Ministry of Defence and General Staff. General Harkins's report to the Pentagon showed that the Americans alone flew 50,000 sorties in 1962.

Upon his arrival in Saigon on December 18, 1962, the US Air Secretary disclosed that by the end of the

(1) Military Aid Command.

(2) Military Assistance Advisory Group.

year the US air fleet in South Vietnam would be four times bigger than in January.

Thus, starting in 1962 the Americans took in hand the direction of the war and assumed part of its execution. To camouflage their aggression they enlisted the participation — at least symbolical — of some satellite countries: Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan. The commitment of the Americans and their armed intervention were maintained at a given level (1) with planes, amphibious cars, and commandos under their direct command. Formerly, they had had only "advisers" to take in hand the puppet army at army corps and divisional level, now they had "advisers" down to regiments, battalions and even companies. The setting up of General Harkins's command in Saigon with forty-odd generals and colonels helped create the conditions for direct intervention.

In an open letter to President Kennedy, sixteen American personalities, among them the renowned scientist Linus Pauling, stated that "the American govern-

(1) In US military terminology, military intervention comprises three levels:

a) *At the lowest level*, the US supplies military aid, advisers and directs the strategy (before 1960).

b) *At the medium level*, the US introduces a certain number of US units which indirectly participate in the fighting and work in the staffs or in the logistic services. The Americans take part in the command at the highest level, in the strategic, tactical and operational fields (in 1960 and in the first months of 1961).

c) *At the highest level*, US units directly participate in the fighting. The Americans assume command at various levels.

ment, through its intervention, has clearly violated all the military prohibitions of the Geneva pacts"; as the US armed forces were actually participating in the operations in South Vietnam, "it is clear that the United States is involved in a real, though undeclared, war." (*New York Times*, April 16, 1962).

In 1961 the puppet army was twenty times bigger and by far better equipped than the PLAF, yet it sustained continual defeats. Some American officers or politicians admitted that the Saigon army could not win because the Diem regime lacked the support of the masses. However, the US command, looking at things from a purely military point of view, held that failure was due to the following causes:

— Diem's army was too scattered to hold territory and lacked mobile fighting forces.

— This army lacked mobility, quick and reliable intelligence, and effective means to cope with guerilla tactics.

Hence the Americans deemed that their first task was to beef up the puppet forces: village militia, security forces, regular forces. The Saigon regular army was brought up to 220,000 men, the village militia to 80,000 and the security forces to 100,000. Each province had one or two mobile battalions of civil guards, one battalion of *dan ve* militia and one motorised squadron, with an officer to command these units as deputy province head. Each district had one company of *dan ve* militia. In the villages and strategic hamlets there were "combat youth" brigades which assumed guard duty for the militia to take part in raids. The training of officers and non-commissioned officers was

shortened by half and the program essentially dealt with counter-guerilla tactics. In 1962, the US-Diem clique managed to fulfil 90 per cent of their plan as regards troop strength. With increased mobility of regular forces, they hoped to reduce the risks of ambushes and speed up the tempo of big raids, whose number increased four times in 1962 compared with 1961. The puppet army was equipped with more than 200 planes and helicopters (not including the 300 planes under direct US command); hundreds of river craft, 200 M.113 amphibious cars (3 companies) vaunted as invulnerable and capable of operating in all terrain.

A network of intelligence with countless receiver-transmitters covered all communes, strategic hamlets and posts. The most up-to-date devices were introduced to cope with PLAF lightning attacks, detect their moves, as well as their storage depots and headquarters, in order to annihilate them by airborne commandos, or massive bombardments. In 1962 alone more than 200 American espionage experts came to Saigon.

By 1962, the unswerving neutrality adopted by Cambodia and the successes achieved by the Geneva Conference on Laos had had no small influence upon the officers and men of the puppet army, as well as the urban middle classes. Mutinies and desertions by whole groups broke out, while pacifist and neutralist tendencies gathered momentum. As a counter-measure, Diem convened a "National Congress of Psychological Warfare" (March 1962) accusing partisans of peace and neutrality of communism. Then he raised three psywar battalions which worked both inside and outside the army and lavishly rewarded the more zealous thugs and executioners.

By mid-March 1962, the US-Diem clique announced that they were "shifting to a 90-day counter-offensive" to "win back the initiative" and reconquer lost areas. Within the framework of this strategy and relying upon two major trumpcards: the helicopters and amphibious cars, a series of new tactics was worked out:

1) *Protracted mop-ups*: Forces ranging from two battalions to one division would sweep a region for three to six months. Operating in co-ordination with the civil guard and the regional militia, these units would sweep back and forth in order to paralyse and annihilate all resistance forces, destroy revolutionary bases and herd the population into strategic hamlets. This tactic derived from the British experience in Malaya was mainly directed against the civilian population. Repression, burning of houses, concentration of peasants, were its aims.

In 1962, twenty large-scale campaigns were launched:

— The trial operation *Sunrise* was mounted on March 23, aimed at wiping out the revolutionary bases and the people's armed forces in six provinces of Eastern Nam Bo. The forces deployed comprised two divisions of regulars supported by regional troops, plus air force and artillery units. During this nine-month campaign McNamara and Generals Lemnitzer and Harkins came several times for on-the-spot inspection.

— *Delta* campaign: General Harkins declared that the Diem administration had agreed to carry out the *Delta* plan devised by the Americans to pacify ten provinces around Saigon.

- *Co Loa* campaign in April, in Gia Dinh province.
- *Hoa Mi* campaign, in April, in Can Tho province.
- *Hai Yen* campaign (lasting eight months), started in May, in Phu Yen province (Trung Bo).
- *Dong Tien* campaign, in Binh Dinh province (Trung Bo).

— *Phuong Hoang* campaign in Quang Ngai province (Trung Bo).

— *An Lac* campaign, in Ban Me Thuot.

— *Binh Tay* campaign in Ca Mau (Western Nam Bo) involving ten battalions of regulars and ten battalions of regional troops (5,000 men).

— *Autumn Winter* campaign in the former resistance zone D involving 15 battalions of regulars.

— *Booldodge* campaign, in November, in Thu Dau Mot province (former resistance zone D).

— *Evening Star* campaign, in October, in Long An and Tay Ninh provinces, involving 6,000 men and 100 officers.

2) *Lightning offensives*. — These offensives were conducted either with commando forces comprising from one or two companies to several battalions, carried mainly by helicopters and operating for a few hours or one day, or with bigger forces comprising from seven to twelve battalions of various arms (heliborne commandos, paratroops, motorised or marine units...) and having many means of transport. The operations lasted from a few days to several weeks.

Most of the time these offensives were supported by air forces, artillery and armour. An application of the

French experience in Algeria, they were directed against PLAF regular units and leading bodies of the resistance.

In 1962, apart from large-scale campaigns, there were about 20,000 raids, twenty times more than in 1961. Over 800 of them involved one battalion or more. Most of the campaigns and raids were launched in the Nam Bo delta, and the mountain regions bordering the Trung Bo coastal plain.

All the enemy tactics, which bore high-sounding names (*counter-guerilla guerilla, heliborne tactics, armour-borne tactics, Flying Eagle*, etc.) had a fierce and cruel character: the soldiers tortured their victims, ripped their bellies open, plucked out their livers, burnt and destroyed harvests and crops with napalm and chemical products, razed villages, penned up the population in strategic hamlets.

Wrote Malcolm W. Browne, AP correspondent in South Vietnam:

"The 'ding-a-ling' method of interrogation involves connection of electrodes from this generator to the temples of the subject, or other parts of the body. In the case of women prisoners, the electrodes often are attached to the nipples. The results are terrifying and painful, but subjects are not permanently damaged. This technique is often applied at provincial interrogation centers by police, and in the field by soldiers.

Another method involves the near drowning of the subject." (The New Face of War p.114-115)

"But some of the forms of torture employed are more sinister, in that they maim or disfigure..."

"In more than one case a Viet Cong suspect has been towed, after interrogation behind an armored personnel carrier across the rice fields. This always results in death in one of its most painful forms." (op. cit. 116)

"Unfortunately, the Viet Cong builds bunkers so skilfully it is rarely touched by aerial bombs or napalm, except in cases of direct hits. But huts are flattened, and civilian loss of life is generally high. In some, the charred bodies of children and babies have made pathetic piles in the middle of the remains of market places." (op. cit. 118).

The raids and bombings inflicted many losses on the population. Ben Tre province, 2,153 square kilometres and 600,000 people, was subjected in March 1962 alone to 74 operations of various sizes, and suffered 195 dead, 56 wounded, 278 arrested. To quote Major Duong Thai Dong, head of Phu Yen province (338,600 people), *Har Yen* campaign ended with 326 killed, 24 wounded, 340 arrested, 318 houses (in fact more than 1,000) burnt, 12,189 peasants herded into strategic hamlets (1).

The Staley-Taylor plan carried out with new war means sowed death and ruins everywhere. General Harkins put at 30,000 the number of people killed by the US-Diem troops in 1962. This figure, although

(1) *Thei Bao*, Saigon, December 7, 1962.

watered down, gave an idea of the barbarity shown against the population. On the strength of a few temporary successes, the enemy thought his plan for pacification within 18 months (July 1961-December 1962) would be fulfilled as scheduled. However, the revolutionary forces soon hit back hard, in particular at the helicopters and the M.113 amphibious cars. Moreover, refusing to obey barbarous orders, puppet units crossed over to the PLAF: from January to October 1962, there were 40 cases of collective rebellion in which soldiers refused to engage in raids or to build posts. In Tan An, Sadec, in the course of many operations the soldiers refused to fire on the population. Many puppet soldiers showed their compatriots how to take shelter. Sometimes a whole battalion refused to herd the population into strategic hamlets. Often soldiers kept clear of the fighting.

Desertions became mass movements which involved even officers:

— In 1961, 17,000 soldiers deserted: in 1962, 30,000. Some of them blew up ammunition storages, destroyed guns, radio sets...

— In 1962, 100 mutinies broke out in which soldiers killed blood-thirsty officers and helped the PLAF capture posts; in twenty cases soldiers beat up or made away with American "advisers."

The goals set by the US-Diem clique for their military activities in 1962 were not achieved:

1/ *To wipe out guerillas:* In 1961, according to US estimates, the guerillas numbered about 20,000. After a year of war, the enemy boasted that they had killed

more than 30,000; yet by the end of 1962 they put the PLAF strength at somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000.

2/ *To build strategic hamlets*: By the end of 1962, out of 17,000 villages in South Vietnam 4,400 had been liberated and 8,980 had broken the enemy's grip. The number of people having escaped the enemy's control thus amounted to 7 million, that is half of the population.

Enemy losses increased markedly:

	1961	1962
Put out of action	33,000	85,000
— Killed and wounded	13,000	50,000
— Captured	3,000	5,000
— Defectors	17,000	30,000

A new fact: the people's forces downed 62 helicopters, and damaged 106 others. The weapons captured — about 10,000 — were enough to equip nearly 100 companies.

Not only did the Staley-Taylor plan fail to be fulfilled on schedule but it proved wholly unworkable.

"During eighteen months," declared Radio Liberation, *"our people's armed forces have faced the frenzied attacks of the US Diem clique. Far from being put out of action as the aggressors had wished, they have become battle-seasoned and are now stronger than ever."*

Despite the presence in South Vietnam of 20,000 Americans, among them 14 generals and over 50 colonels, and despite an annual expenditure of 500 million dollars, Kennedy had to admit at his press conference

of December 12, 1962, that the Americans were running into great difficulties in face of the South Vietnamese guerillas and that they were in fact finding themselves in a "tunnel with no end in sight".

The Tide Turned

By 1962, the eighteen months set for the pacification of South Vietnam had passed, but the war had not yielded the results anticipated by the White House. To help the Saigon army win back the initiative at all costs, the United States supplied it with a sizable reinforcement of ultra-modern HU-1B helicopters, 8 naval craft, 100 river craft, M.114 armoured personnel carriers (an improved version of the M.113's), brought up US effectives in South Vietnam from 12,000 to 15,000, and the puppet regular and support troops from 360,000 to 400,000 (not to mention the civil guards and "combat youth" in the strategic hamlets).

A wind of optimism blew in the leading circles. While General Harkins boasted that the "governmental army" would win quicker than anticipated, the commander-in-chief of the US marines trumpeted that starting from February 1963, it would hold the "Vietcong" by the throat.

It was then that something happened in Ap Bac.

The Ap Bac turning point

Ap Bac (My Tho province) was a small hamlet of 600 inhabitants sixty kilometres southwest of Saigon. Upon learning that the 514th Viet Cong battalion had taken up positions there, General Harkins decided to have it destroyed by 2,000 Diem soldiers under General Robert York.

For the first time, enemy mobile forces were thrown into battle together with 15 helicopters, 13 river craft, 13 M.113 amphibious cars, and a company of 105-mm. guns. More than 1,000 shells were fired and tens of tons of bombs were dropped for hours on end.

After fifteen hours of fighting, the PLAF put out of action 450 men (among them 13 Americans), downed 6 helicopters, damaged 15 others, sank 2 river craft, and destroyed three M.113's (in which 36 enemy soldiers were burnt to death).

The combat positions, underground shelters and communication trenches in the hamlet had neutralized the artillery pounding. The "*combat village*" had proved to be remarkably efficacious. Hidden in their positions, the guerillas waited for the assailants to come at close range before shooting at them point blank. Having no armour-piercing shells the Ap Bac defenders lobbed grenades right inside the M.113's. The helicopters had also proved very vulnerable. The Ap Bac battle showed that resolute combatants and fortified villages could check the Americans' trumpcards: helicopters and amphibious cars. This was a great discovery.

Ap Bac revealed the importance of morale: the people's fighters stood firm and fired at close range, while the Saigon soldiers relied exclusively on their amphibious cars and helicopters, and obeyed Yankee officers only with the greatest reluctance.

Ap Bac also laid bare the contradictions between the Americans and the puppet troops. The former blamed the latter for their lack of combativeness and the puppet officers for their imperviousness to American advice. They demanded the destitution of the head of Dinh Tuong province and the M.113 company commander. During the battle, an American major was abandoned in a swamp, surrounded American pilots received no help, a puppet battalion refused to carry out American orders: all this spoke volumes about the US-Diem "comradeship-in-arms".

Stimulated by this victory rich in tactical experiences, the entire population launched a sweeping movement with the watchword: "Emulate Ap Bac in wiping out the enemy". A turning point in the resistance, Ap Bac ushered in a phase of great military successes for the liberation forces.

*

Raids and Counter-Raids

(January-June 1963)

In the first half of 1963, the enemy mounted 10,470 operations, of which 800 involved more than one battalion. Apart from artillery shellings and air bombings, there were from 1,500 to 2,000 infantry raids a month.

Protracted and large-scale operations launched unremittingly against any given region were more numerous and fiercer than in the previous year. Enemy losses also increased to three times the figure of the first half of 1962: 33,370 killed or wounded (among them 392 Americans), 1,740 taken prisoners, while 5,000 weapons were lost to the PLAF.

Even General Harkins's report, which minimized the losses, admitted that during the first half of 1963 the casualties suffered by the "government" troops increased by 33 per cent compared with the corresponding period in 1962, while "Vietcong" losses diminished by 30 per cent. For weapons losses, the score was plus 30 per cent for the "government" and minus 25 per cent for the "Vietcong".

The first half of 1963 was marked by the following operations :

— *Wave of Love* (*sic!*) started on January 3, 1963, was directed against Ca Mau, "one of the strongest and oldest Vietcong bases." Scheduled for three months (with the participation of 30 river craft, two infantry regiments of the Seventh Division and three battalions of marines and commandos), the operation was hastily called off after only two months owing to heavy losses: 600 men put out of action, among them one American captain; one gunboat sunk and 18 others damaged, one plane downed and another damaged.

— *Duc Thang 1* (March 13-15, 1963), 9,000 men supported by 20 helicopters, tens of HU-1A jet helicopters, B.26 fighter-bombers, L.19 and T.28 reconnaissance planes, M.113 amphibious cars and gunboats were hurled

against several villages bordering the Plain of Reeds, near Ap Bac. The enemy hoped to throw a "steel noose" around this people's base and capture a people's unit. However, harassed wherever they went and decimated by snipers, spiked traps and mines, the US - puppet forces withdrew after suffering 300 men put out of action and two M.113's damaged.

— *Airlifted operations Meteor I* (January 2-6, 1963) and *Meteor II* (March 24-27, 1963) set as their objective the occupation by surprise of the former Duong Minh Chau resistance zone in Tay Ninh province and the destruction of the liberation armed forces there. Put under the direct command of Generals Harkins and Ton That Dinh, they ended in a complete fiasco.

— The sweep against Giong Trom (Ben Tre province) from March 9 to 12, cost the US - Diem clique 130 men.

— The raid against *Ben Cat* in the former resistance zone D (June 6-12). Despite a great display of force (2,000 men, 100 M.113 amphibious cars, 50 gunboats and combat launches), losses were heavy: 574 men put out of action and 14 planes downed or damaged. The enemy defence positions were so shaken that 16 posts and 19 watchtowers had to be evacuated.

— Operations *Dan Thang* and *Lam Son* in the west and the north of Quang Ngai province (end of the first quarter). The "Republican Army" Radio admitted on April 20, 1963, that within a week "the Vietcong had unleashed 12 attacks against watch-towers in strategic hamlets, a police post and the H.Q. of an infantry division, inside and outside Quang Ngai city".

Loc Ninh, a second Ap Bac

From July to October 1963, the PLAF scored repeated and big successes. October was rich in events, the most significant being unquestionably the *Loc Ninh* victory. Here it was the PLAF which launched the offensive by wiping out two posts on October 17 and 18. The US - Diem command rushed in 2,000 men from Soc Trang by road and water for a counter-attack. Fighter planes gave cover to 17 helicopters dropping the troops, but on their landing the latter suffered "losses amounting to 80 per cent of total battle casualties" (AP).

One hundred soldiers were parachuted north of Loc Ninh for a thrust into the centre of the battlefield. "But the two air-dropped detachments," — AP reported — "were cut to pieces within a few minutes by mortar fire."

"They waded waistdeep in the mud and sustained heavy losses" (UPI). Other airlifted reinforcements were repelled. 300 rangers brought in by 21 Flying Bananas ran into a fierce resistance.

At nightfall the Saigon forces withdrew hastily, leaving behind their dead and wounded. The US-puppet command thus suffered a heavy blow for its attempted inroad into Loc Ninh: 600 men put out of action, among them 22 American officers killed; 4 helicopters downed, 30 others damaged and 3 posts evacuated.

Loc Ninh marked a new tactical progress of the PLAF who were now in a position to defeat helilifted troops in flat country far from their base.