

Loc Ninh contributed to hastening the US decision to replace Ngo Dinh Diem, proved to be utterly inefficient.

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Economic War, Chemical War

Economic War

An important aspect of the "special" war consists in striking at the economic life of the population. General Wheeler, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said during a visit to Saigon that military activities made up but one-third of a solution to the problem of how to defeat the "Communists" in South Vietnam, the other two-thirds being political and economic. The economic war was part and parcel of the special war. The enemy strove to wreck the economy of the regions it could not control, cutting off supplies (rice, salt, cloth, farming implements) and launching "hunger campaigns" such as the one at Quang Nam to try to subdue the population.

The enemy tried to raid the rich and populated provinces. This was General Harkins's project aimed at pacifying the ten provinces of the Nam Bo delta. This was also the main target of "crop protection" campaigns in the provinces of Western Nam Bo by the end of 1961 and beginning of 1962. The "Delta" campaign (March 1962) aimed at controlling the Mekong basin. The "rice preservation" campaign in the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen (April 1962) aimed at plundering and stocking the rice of the

population. The *An Lac* campaign (October 1962) aimed at isolating Lac Thien district, a region of fertile ricefields in the province of Darlac.

The puppet authorities set up a drastic rice-control system. They forbade the population to establish reserves in the fields (even temporarily) or private reserves in their homes. In some regions, they compelled the peasants to deposit their paddy in the military posts, and get it back only a little at a time. In the "unsafe" regions of Binh Thuan province, each family was allowed to keep only enough rice for three or five days. Rice control was even harsher on the Western Plateaux. In Long An province, the puppet authorities forced the peasants to sell their paddy dirt cheap. In Quang Ngai province it was forbidden to sell rice, salt, farming implements to the hill people, and to set up rice-husking mills far from the posts and markets. The rice stocks of traders and plantations were also limited. At the Zau Tieng rubber plantation, starting from July 1962 the rice stock for the 5,100 workers was reduced by one-third, lest the workers would share their rice rations with the guerillas. By the end of 1962, traders and other civilians were not allowed to take rice either from Saigon to East Nam Bo or from Nam Bo to the Western Plateaux.

Often the enemy carried his savagery to the point of burning all, destroying all. On January 10, 1962, in a raid north of Phan Thiet province, Saigon troops burnt 850 tons of paddy and 10 tons of rice. From March 26 to April 25, 1962, they burnt 107 tons of rice and 630 tons of paddy in the Second Tactical Region. In May

1962, they burnt 600 tons of paddy, devastated 1,500 hectares of orchards, set fire to 3,000 houses in three provinces: Tay Ninh, Bien Hoa and Ba Ria. Early in 1963, they plundered 20,000 *gia* (1) of paddy and destroyed on the spot 10,000 others. During the *Hai Yen* campaign in Phu Yen province they slaughtered 1,300 oxen and buffaloes. In April 1962, in An Tuc district (Binh Dinh province) 30 hectares of dry crops, in Hong Ngu district (Chau Doc province) 40 hectares of ripening paddy were burnt by bombs and napalm.

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Chemical War

General Delmore, in charge of chemical warfare, had his headquarters in Saigon and was under General Harkins's command.

From August 1961 to the end of 1962 the US-puppet clique poured toxic chemicals over mountain regions, forests, along important highways, around their own bases and sometimes over regions of orchards in the delta.

During this 17-month period 50 chemical-dropping raids were carried out over 11 provinces: Quang Ngai, Kon Tum, Binh Dinh, Gia Lai, Bien Hoa, Ba Ria, Tan An, Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, Rach Gia, Bac Lieu, along Highways 13, 14, 15, around Bien Hoa and Da Nang.

The Pentagon pinned much hope on its chemical war, regarding it as a major counter-guerilla trumpcard.

(1) One *gia* = 23 kilograms.

According to Reuter, as early as 1961 the Americans had worked out a plan to obliterate the former resistance zone D by an intensive use of "defoliants", followed by that of napalm over an area of several thousand square kilometres, after which the zone would be surrounded and all those trying to escape would be massacred.

In 1961, toxic chemical sprays were made essentially on a trial basis.

In 1962, realizing that the guerillas had their bases not only in the forests but also and mostly among the masses of the people, the enemy dropped those toxic products on the delta, on regions they could not control. In 1963, the chemical war was stepped up. Highway 13 (Bien Hoa province) was hit along 20km, on a one-kilometre fringe on each side of the road. The damage was considerable: 82 hectares of rubber, 15 hectares of coffee, 77 hectares of orchards, 5 hectares of dry crops, 40 plantations of tangerines, and 259 hectares of ricefields were destroyed. Many people showed signs of grave intoxication: nausea, haemorrhage, loss of consciousness. Two days after the spraying, US-puppet troops raided the area and herded the population into strategic hamlets to "preserve" (sic) them from contamination.

The chemical war was intensified even more after November 1962. The sprayings hit the Mekong delta, particularly the provinces of Ben Tre, My Tho, Go Cong and Bac Lieu.

From December 1, 1963, to January 15, 1964, there were eight spraying raids: 5,700 people (including nearly 3,000 children) were poisoned and thousands of hectares

of crops destroyed. In Khanh Binh Dong (Ca Mau province) alone, more than 1,000 people were hit on December 23, 1963 (among them 500 children). In an operation in Play Holu (Darlac province) on January 8, 1964, the number of victims ran into 500. Within a few months, thousands of tons of toxic chemicals were introduced into South Vietnam, including arsenicals, 2,4-D, 2,4-5T (highly concentrated), DNP, DNC, etc. Towards the end of November 1964, many dockers at Da Nang were intoxicated for having handled these products.

The people struggled by every means on hand against the chemical war. Many soldiers and officers of the puppet army, whose parents were intoxicated and properties damaged, also participated. All the civil guards and militiamen at Hung My, Huong Diem, Binh Chanh, Phu Nhuan, Cu Lao Oc, Quoi Thanh (Ben Tre province) joined the masses to demand medical care and damages for the victims.

The protest movement against the chemical war spread to the cities and to Saigon.

The "Strategic Hamlets"

The setting up of "strategic hamlets", conceived by the Saigon administration as a "State policy", constituted the backbone of the strategy of special war.

South Vietnam has about 17,000 villages and hamlets. According to a program made public, the US-puppet

clique intended to build 16,332 strategic hamlets (excluding the towns) within a year and a half, i.e. before the end of 1962.

The people were compelled to contribute manpower, money and materials to erect those concentration camps, in which they were to be penned up. The usual way was to launch raid after raid to round them up and drive them into the strategic hamlets.

In 1962, the Americans spent 40 million dollars on the strategic hamlets. Some satellite countries of the United States gave the Saigon government important "aid" in barbed wire. Apart from having to supply the manpower, the population had to pay for everything: ferro-concrete pillars, metal spikes, barbed wire and bamboo stakes.

Of course, nobody was willing to leave his house, his garden and the tombs of his ancestors to shut himself up in a strategic hamlet, where he would have to pay a dozen kinds of taxes and would be at the mercy of petty tyrants. The enemy had to resort to the most savage means:

— To compel people to take down their houses under threat of arson and arrest.

— To raid and massacre. Most of the raids in 1962 and 1963 were aimed at concentrating the population. So were the artillery shellings.

— To wreck the economy: burn the crops, destroy the orchards, plunder the rice, slaughter the cattle.

— To spray toxic chemicals on "unsafe" areas. Once penned up, the peasant lived behind fences, barbed wire, moats filled with spikes, mine-fields, stockades

with concrete blockhouses, under the control of militiamen, "Republican Youths" and "people's self-defence corps", and was severed from familiar surroundings. The houses were built wall-to-wall to form "inter-family groups", each family being held responsible for all the others. Both children and grown-ups had their photos pasted on the family book and on a board hung at the entrance door. In many strategic hamlets, each person had to have his own seat in his house, which bore his name and which he had to occupy whenever a controller turned up. The inhabitants were given identity cards bearing their photos and fingerprints, wrapped in plastic. In Gia Dinh province, each citizen upward of ten had two cards: one yellow for moving about inside the hamlet, and the other, green, for going out. The peasants could not go to the fields early in the morning and return late in the evening. Getting in and out of the hamlets had to be done at specific hours through check-points. Thus concentrated in the hamlets, the peasants had to let their fields lie waste. Moreover, they were subject to all kinds of corvées: building of administrative offices and military posts, undergoing military training, alert manoeuvres, guard duty, attending meetings, "study" sessions, participating in "political activities", "denunciation of communists", etc. To prevent the population from supplying the guerillas, paddy and other foodstuffs were kept in stores and rations distributed day by day.

Suspects were put to torture to find out "guerillas" or "Vietcongs".

For the Americans the setting up of strategic hamlets was one of the fundamental strategies of the special war to shatter the revolutionary movement.

It had the following goals :

In the military field, to turn the villages of South Vietnam into "strongholds" capable not only of repelling the patriots' armed forces but also of "compelling the guerillas to accept pitched battles". Ngo Dinh Nhu thus vaunted the strategic hamlets (1): "*In the military field, the strategic hamlet isolates the enemy, severs him from the people and forces him to fight in conditions favourable to us and unfavourable to him.*"

The strategic hamlets were to constitute, with the system of posts along the highways, "belts" which divided up the rural areas and ensured security for the enemy-held urban centres and bases.

In the political field, they were to help crush the popular struggle, destroy the revolutionary bases, rig up and consolidate the puppet administrative apparatus in the villages, the intelligence network and reactionary organizations, and restore control by the puppet government over the population.

In the economic field, the enemy hoped to lay hands on the human and material resources of the countryside to serve their growing war efforts, at the same time to cut off supplies for the guerillas and put the people at his mercy by getting hold of their food reserves.

(1) Speech at the inauguration of Cu Chi strategic hamlet (August 31, 1962)

In the social field, the enemy planned to introduce some phoney reforms to deceive the population, restore the rights of the reactionary landlords, and consolidate the status and privileges of his lackeys in the villages: members of the administration, secret agents, civil guards, militiamen.

The implementation of the plan was to follow the "oil blot" technique and comprised three stages. First, strategic hamlets would be built in the "pacified" zones, then in the disputed zones, and finally in the liberated zones, which the enemy hoped to reconquer.

A unified system of direction was organized from top to bottom. At the highest level, the "Special Central Committee of Strategic Hamlets" presided over by Ngo Dinh Nhu included among its members the Ministers of Defence, Interior, Civil Affairs, Rural Reforms, Education, Security and Police. The Committee was placed under the direction and direct control of the "Sub-Committee of Rural Affairs" under USOM (1) and of the US "Committee of Direction of Strategic Hamlets". Each military sector had an "Inspection of Strategic Hamlets"; each province, district and village a "Special Committee for the Building of Strategic Hamlets."

The construction of a strategic hamlet was usually done in four stages:

- 1) A fierce raid followed by the rounding up of the population, their brainwashing and the gathering of building materials.

(1) United States Operations Mission.

2) Building of the stockade and defences of the hamlet.

3) Consolidation of the administration, the reactionary organizations and espionage network, setting up of armed and paramilitary forces (1).

4) Exercises in alert and counter-guerilla operations, building of offices for the administration and reactionary organizations, information hall, organization of faked "relief".

After these stages, one came to the "internal front", that is to the denunciation and extermination of patriots or suspected ones.

From the end of 1961 to that of 1963, the struggle against the concentration of the population and for the destruction of strategic hamlets constituted a task of prime importance for the South Vietnamese people.

In response to the NFL's appeal, the masses rose up in a widespread and continual insurrectional movement:

(1) The armed and paramilitary forces of a hamlet usually comprised:

— a group of self-defence commandos armed with sub-machineguns, rifles and grenades, whose members were chosen among the Republican Youths;

— a platoon of "Rural Defence Youth" including several combat groups, one in charge of planting spikes and laying mines, and a liaison and intelligence group;

— a first-aid group;

— a supply group;

— a group of intelligence and "political work among the enemy".

Besides, all able-bodied youngsters and men were enrolled in platoons or sections of "people's self-defence" forces in charge of ensuring the defence of the hamlet or serving the regulars in case of fighting.

All these forces were put under the command of the hamlet administrative committee.

First stage (end of 1961 - May 1962): The population tried to slow down the implementation of the strategic hamlet program and curtail the damage done by it, and destroyed a number of hamlets. The enemy had to cut down somewhat his program of action. However, he managed to restore what the masses had destroyed.

Second stage (after June 1962). While the enemy concentrated his forces to build strategic hamlets in some regions, the people mustered theirs to pull them down in others.

Manifold were the forms of struggle: meetings, demonstrations, petitions, etc. The demonstrations took place in villages, district centres and provincial capitals and lasted one or several days. Sometimes, thousands of persons gathered to bar the way to some "bigwig", as in November 1961 when the population of Sadec province stopped "Vice-President" Nguyen Ngoc Tho and demanded the dissolution of strategic hamlets. Sometimes, the masses argued violently with the puppet authorities, taking them at their demagogic promises. When the enemy razed houses, destroyed gardens and properties and tried to drive the population into strategic hamlets, there took place scuffles in which the people stalled for time or tried to persuade the soldiers to side with them. In many counter-raids, guerillas and PLAF shattered the enemy plans. Old folk armed with only knives managed to put Diemist agents to flight or to stop bulldozers by throwing themselves in front of these vehicles.

Able-bodied young men joined the guerillas and the PLAF while leaving only old folk, women and children at home. Sometimes people moved to villages beyond

the enemy grip or to the liberated zone. The mountaineers withdrew more deeply into the forest while keeping up the fight.

By the end of 1961 the struggle against the herding of the population was so fierce that the US - Diem clique had to bring the target of 16,332 strategic hamlets scheduled for 1962 down to 6,000. Apart from the military operations, the demonstrations in 1962 alone mobilized several million people against the building of strategic hamlets. At last only 3,000 strategic hamlets were set up, instead of 6,000. Of these 1,500 were later destroyed. Up to May 1962 the enemy was able to rebuild destroyed hamlets. But after June 1962 he failed to rebuild any hamlet. In the second half of 1962, 300 hamlets were destroyed beyond recovery while 100 others were turned by the people into their own "combat hamlets". Certain hamlets were destroyed by the population scores of times after re-building.

Towards the end of 1962, fighting often erupted inside the strategic hamlets themselves, which were often bombed by enemy aircraft following discovery that the "Vietcong" had settled among the population with the connivance of the "government authorities".

The report to the Second Congress of the NFL in 1964 revealed that in 1962 and 1963 the population had shattered the bulk of the strategic hamlets and that this was *the heaviest blow dealt at the enemy's policy of aggression and division.*

By the end of 1963, 80 per cent of the strategic hamlets had been completely destroyed, including those built around the towns and along the main

highways; 3,900 strategic hamlets had been turned into combat hamlets for the people's forces. Patriotic forces were present in the remainder.

The fiasco of the strategic hamlet policy was a major factor leading to the collapse of the Diem regime.

The Crisis of the US-Diem Regime

The people's heroic struggle, by foiling the enemy's military operations, exacerbated the contradictions within his camp. The victories of the NFL, by pulling to pieces the apparatus of repression, incited the townsfolk to rise up.

The US-Diem duet, more and more dissonant, entered its finale.

The struggle of the Buddhists and the school youth was to sharpen the contradictions even more. On May 8, 1963, in Hue, the police fired on believers celebrating Buddha's anniversary: 14 wounded, 3 killed, among them a child crushed under the caterpillars of an American tank. A wave of anger swept the country, submerging Saigon, Hue and the big cities. On June 11, Venerable Thich Quang Duc burnt himself to death in protest.

The Americans tried to shift the responsibility for all crimes onto Diem, who in fact only obeyed their orders. Diem became useless, inefficient and burdensome. He had to be made away with. Since long the American secret services had kept other cards ready.

In his press conference of July 17, 1963, US President Kennedy declared that disagreements between the Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government had jeopardized the efficiency of US aid in the "anti-communist war." (The New York Times).

Having got wind of the coup scheduled by the Americans for August 1963, Diem stole a march on them by declaring martial law, planning to disorganise the plot and eliminate agitation in the cities. But this did not prevent his opponents from mounting a coup with US help; on November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown by a military junta and murdered along with his brother Nhu.

The military junta led by Duong Van Minh did not fare any better. An UPI despatch of December 14, 1963, admitted that in November "the Vietcong had intensified their attacks throughout South Vietnam to an unprecedented degree, inflicting on governmental troops the most serious defeats since the beginning of the year."

From then on, coups and putsches succeeded one another. The political crisis of the puppet regime went beyond recovery, bringing in its wake the failure of all the military projects of the US command.

At the beginning of 1964 the US command hoped to drive the people's forces out of the Mekong delta and the Western Plateaux, and wrest back the initiative of operations by taking advantage of the dry season, the concentration of forces available after the evacuation of hundreds of isolated posts, and the creation of mobile units.

In March 1964, McNamara again came to Saigon. The Johnson-McNamara plan adopted on the 17th was but a revised version of the Staley-Taylor plan to cope with a worsening situation. With increased means at its disposal, Washington, however, no longer hoped to pacify the whole country, but only a few key regions: at first the Mekong delta, then only seven provinces: Binh Zuong, Tay Ninh, Ben Tre, My Tho, Long An, Gia Dinh, Hau Nghia. Finally, it concentrated on Long An, "a special sector" under the Saigon High Command.

McNamara planned to complete the pacification of Long An, begun in December 1963, within 12 months. But one year after, according to *La Tribune des Nations* (November 6, 1964), the people's forces were masters of even the Saigon suburbs, as the Americans themselves admitted: "As a matter of fact, the government did not control the villages any longer. Of the 1,100,000 inhabitants of Long An and Dinh Tuong provinces, it was estimated that 80 per cent, i.e. almost all those living outside the 14 district centres and the 2 provincial capitals, were under Vietcong control" (UPI November 11, 1964). "Most of the 5,900 *dan ve* (civil guards) had deserted or had been put out of action by the Vietcong." (same news report).

Throughout 1964, the people's forces fought 40,000 engagements, put out of action 135,000 men, among them 2,100 Americans, downed or destroyed on the ground 542 planes and helicopters, destroyed or damaged 992 military vehicles, sank or damaged 292 naval and river craft, wiped out 139 posts, sectors and military training centres, and captured 17,500 weapons.

The PLAF constantly held the initiative by launching victorious counter-raids, striking at US billets and mounting important offensives crowned with the brilliant victory of *Binh Gia* in December 1964.

The "three-pronged tactics": *armed struggle, political struggle and agitation work among enemy troops*, was continually applied. A result of this was the foiling of the enemy strategic operation *Dien Hong* (March 1964) in Ben Tre.

The US raid against Ben Suc (Thu Zau Mot province) in the well-known *Iron Triangle* northwest of Saigon hit a vacuum during the first wave of attack (August 12-18, 1964). But during the second wave (November 18-21) the NFL fighters, thought to be crushed under showers of incendiary and phosphorus bombs, emerged from underground shelters to pour a deadly fire at the paratroops who entered Boi Loi. Lost amidst a maze of trenches and decimated by counter-attacks, the assailants had to withdraw four days after.

PLAF Great Offensives.

It was also in 1964 that the PLAF launched offensives in Vinh Thuan (Rach Gia) on April 11, An Lao (Binh Dinh) on December 7, and Binh Gia (Ba Ria) in the same month.

In *An Lao*, the people's forces put out of action 680 men, captured 310 weapons and liberated the valleys. This victory was highly significant: on the one hand, it was the first success in Trung Bo as resounding as those won in Nam Bo since Ap Bac (January 2, 1963).

on the other, the uninterrupted and protracted PLAF attack startled the American specialists who proclaimed that the "Vietcong" had used at An Lao tactics similar to those applied in the 1950's at the time of the Indo-China war (UPI).

The PLAF's most brilliant victory in 1964 was indisputably that of Binh Gia (Ba Ria) on interprovincial Road 2, 60 km. from Saigon and 65 km. from Bien Hoa.

Binh Gia was the most sustained battle (from December 4, 1964, to January 3, 1965) waged on a complex front of the "special war".

Attacking the enemy without let-up in spite of ever more reinforcements, which were highly mobile and equipped with modern weapons, the PLAF applied different tactics in a very simple way: surprise attack, mobile warfare, ambush, harassment, attack from behind, etc. Operating on a small theatre in enemy-occupied territory, they would not have been able to camouflage their troops, supply them, evacuate the wounded, etc., without the support and active participation of the population and the regional guerillas. As a result, 2,000 enemy troops were killed, wounded, or taken prisoners, two battalions annihilated, several companies wiped out, 24 planes and helicopters downed, 13 others damaged and three squadrons of 37 armoured cars destroyed. Binh Gia proved that the PLAF were capable of defeating the puppet army, whatever the scale of the operations.

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Failure of the Special War

The situation at the end of 1964 was summed up by the French paper *La Croix* of December 23, 1964, as follows: "Nothing has been pacified since the implementation of the 'pacification plan'; the 'Vietcong' are moving close to Saigon; the Trung Bo provinces, where the government used to rule over 70 per cent of the territory, are now 80% under 'Vietcong' control; no road in Nam Bo is safe, including that linking Saigon with Vung Tau (1)."

Alsop wrote in the *Washington Post* of January 1, 1965, that the Americans were facing defeat, both military and political, and that time was running out for them.

To retrieve this critical situation, Washington prepared to step up its aggression by directly committing US and satellite forces and bombing North Vietnam.

The Special War Reached Its Apex

During the first quarter of 1965, the PLAF fought 4,300 engagements. They put out of action 45,260 enemy troops, among them 1,127 Americans, annihilated 8 battalions, 57 companies and 97 platoons, razed or droven the enemy out of 181 posts including 9 important positions: Viet An (Quang Nam province), Zuong Lieu, Gia Huu, Nha Da, Phu Ly, Cho Gom (Binh Dinh province), Thanh Than (Thua Thien province), Lo O (Binh Dinh province), and Cau Xo Huong (Gia Lai province). They captured 7,360 weapons of various kinds, downed 111 planes, sank 26 gunboats,

(1) Cape St. Jacques.

destroyed 275 military vehicles including 93 M. 113's, annihilated 400 strategic hamlets, liberated 100 villages with 658,700 inhabitants, 8 towns and district centres.

The first quarter of 1965 was marked by the following victories won in February:

— *Pleiku* (February 7). Pleiku was the seat of the H.Q. of the Second Army Corps and the Second Tactical Region. There the Americans set up Camp Holloway where lived one thousand "advisers". Three kilometres away was an airfield with a 2,000-metre runway.

The defence system comprised countless trenches, a moats, barbed wire fences, minefields and 13 posts. As the population had been herded in strategic hamlets, no stranger could enter this territory surrounded by no-man's-land.

At 2 a.m. on February 7, the attack began with a mortar barrage followed by volleys of 57-mm. recoilless guns and grenade-launchers positioned 300-500m away; 52 barracks of Camp Holloway as well as the airfield were ablaze. The first volley, UPI reported, destroyed 17 helicopters and 3 transport planes. Amidst the explosions, PLAF assault groups, led by Saigon soldiers who had crossed over to their side, pounced on enemy lairs.

Within less than thirty minutes, the assailants put out of action 357 enemy troops (dead and wounded), among them many American officers and technicians, destroyed 42 planes, razed one blockhouse and made away with a platoon defending the airfield.

— *Viet An* (February 5, 1965). This strong point, 150 m. long and 90 m. wide was perched on a hill north of the Khoan river (Quang Nam province).

Reinforced by a platoon of 155-mm. guns, Viet An was nicknamed the "Steel Wall" of the defence system north of the Khoan river.

This outpost was attacked at 2:20 on February 7 by the PLAF, who opened breaches in the barbed wire and stormed the centre. After a 12-minute engagement they put their adversary out of action, seized two 155-mm. guns, two 81-mm. mortars, one recoilless gun, etc. Their banner "Union-Valour-Victory" fluttered over the place. The capture of Viet An shook the defence system north of the Khoan river. The enemy mustered two battalions of amphibious cars and attempted to take back the position. But falling into an ambush he lost 200 men and one armoured group. The remnants withdrew in disorder towards Tam Quan.

That defeat drew a sigh and these words from the commander of the puppet First Division: "*This is an unpredictable failure. One cannot believe that the morale of the republican soldier has dropped so low.*"

—Zuong Lieu, Gia Huu, Nhung pass (February 8, 1965) While the people's struggle to destroy strategic hamlets was surging in Binh Dinh province, the Saigon regime sought to tighten its hold on this province and to reinforce the posts defending strategic Highway 1 which runs through it. Gia Huu, occupied by three platoons of militiamen, received one company of regulars and one section of 105-mm. guns. Zuong Lieu saw its garrison of three platoons of militiamen strengthened by one company of regulars.

At 2 a.m. on February 7, the population and the PLAF stormed Zuong Lieu and seized 169 weapons,

On the same night, Gia Huu was razed after a 15-minute engagement. Meanwhile, the PLAF attacked a military train at Hoai Thanh, 8km. north of Bong Son. The population destroyed a whole series of strategic hamlets and liberated a vast area in the districts of Hoai Nhan and Phu My. The enemy withdrew hastily from Tam Quan. On the 8th, he feverishly mustered the remaining units of the 40th regiment and one battalion of the 41st; one battalion of commandos, one group of M. 113 amphibious cars, and two companies of 105-mm. guns, and made them advance in two columns towards Zuong Lieu. The first column was annihilated at Nhung Pass between Phu My and Zuong Lieu in an ambush which cost it 663 dead, wounded or taken prisoners, 10 amphibious cars and 222 weapons.

The February victories testified to the tactical level reached by the PLAF who were now able to capture any enemy position by combining methods of regular warfare with those of guerilla warfare.

While multiplying raids, the puppet command savagely bombed the civilian population at Ba Ria, Bien Hoa, Thu Zau Mot, Tay Ninh, Gia Lai... in the hope of striking at the people's bases. A futile hope, remarked *The New York Times* of March 8, 1965, "since a guerilla movement could not be suppressed by dropping bombs on phantom troops."

Toxic gas, far from breaking the people's morale, only exacerbated their resistance. "If the American imperialists think they can intimidate the people of South Vietnam by using gases as war means, they are grossly mistaken." (Declaration of the NFL on March 24, 1965).

Ba Già (May 1965):

End of the Special War

To retrieve those setbacks, Washington and Saigon hastened to intensify their efforts, in three ways:

— Johnson increased military expenditures to 700 million dollars. In May he sent 20,000 men as reinforcements, that is almost the entire Third Marine Division and the 173rd Paratroop Brigade, bringing US troop strength to 54,000 men, to be raised to 75,000 in July. For its part Saigon pledged to recruit 160,000 more soldiers.

— The Pentagon stepped up the air war against North Vietnam. *This war of destruction, begun on August 5, 1964, was brought to its full scope after February 7, 1965.*

— To camouflage this extension of US aggression, Johnson launched a diplomatic offensive with his Baltimore speech (April 7, 1965) in which he proposed a “*negotiated settlement*” and “*negotiations without preconditions*”...

In fact, by his threat of intensified bombing Johnson hoped to bring the Vietnamese to their knees.

Finally, neither the peace manoeuvres nor the war efforts of the Americans succeeded.

The second quarter of 1965 saw new US-puppet defeats in April. *Long An* province broke three large-scale raids, putting out of action 400 men and downing 11 planes. *Rach Gia* foiled a raid by 5 battalions, 40 planes, 27 river craft and one squadron of M.113's, wiping out 500 men, downing 8 planes, destroying 5 M. 113's, and

sinking 4 river craft. *Kon Tum* put out of action 300 men, etc. In *Trung Bo*, *Binh Dinh* launched several victorious counter-raids, putting out of action 550 men, destroying four M.113's, and downing six planes. *Quang Nam* annihilated seven battalions rushed against *Viet An* to defend the southern part of the US base at *Da Nang*. On the night of April 2, the people's forces in *Gia Dinh* mortared *Zi An*, 15 km. from *Saigon*, putting out of action 300 South Korean mercenaries.

May was illustrated by a series of PLAF successes in *Hai Yen* (Ca Mau): 389 enemy troops put out of action, among them 11 Americans; *Song Be* (Bien Hoa): a defence system 40 km. long destroyed, 1,389 enemy troops put out of action, including 28 Americans, and 14 planes downed; *Bien Hoa*: the airfield attacked, 149 planes, among them 44 B.57's, destroyed, 350 Americans put out of action; *Khe Tre* (Thua Thien): one battalion of regulars and one company of *bao an* militiamen, 477 men in all, put out of action; *Nui Thanh* (Quang Nam): one company of US marines (139 men) wiped out, 1,719 enemy troops put out of action. The battles of *Song Be* and *Ba Gia* deserved particular notice.

— *Song Be* (or *Ba Ra*, chief-town of *Phuoc Long*) was a military sector defended by a 10-km system of fortifications with strong points. On the night of May 6, 1965, the PLAF attacked *Ba Ra*, the airfield and *Phuoc Binh* subsector, blowing up several blockhouses. They seized the M.113's and used them against the enemy, who fled in panic. After two hours of fighting the people's forces occupied *Ba Ra*, destroyed the military sector, the administrative sector, the information centre and the artillery park. Operating with the help of the population,

the guerillas destroyed an entire system of strategic hamlets over 40 km. On the morning of the 11th, airlifted forces, unable to land on Ba Ra owing to a violent fire, came down 10 km. further south. But they could only advance 7 km. that day and then fell into an ambush. The enemy lost 1,390 men in all.

— *Ba Gia*, located at a road junction in Quang Ngai province owed its importance to its role as a market place between the plain and the mountains, and constituted a strong defence system along provincial Road 5, garrisoned by the 51st Infantry Regiment. On the night of May 28, the PLAF dealt their first blow at Loc Tho, 3 km. from Ba Gia, wiping out one platoon. On the morning of the 29th, with artillery support, two companies of the 1st battalion at Ba Gia, reinforced by militiamen, launched a reprisal operation. This detachment fell into an ambush and suffered 100 killed and 219 taken prisoners.

On the evening of the 29th, flushed with victory, the PLAF tightened their grip on Ba Gia, after annihilating Go Cao with its two 105-mm. guns. On the morning of the 30th, they pounded Ba Gia and Ha Thanh. The enemy hastily sent three battalions from Quang Ngai town. Two were decimated. The third, not daring to rush to their rescue, occupied a height near Ba Gia where it positioned its artillery, but it was soon encircled and cut to pieces.

The NFL military commentator Truong Son wrote: "The Ba Gia victory bears important significance; it is typical of an annihilation battle. New factors have appeared, creating a new situation:

1) — *Our capability to annihilate a multi-battalion combat group has become a reality.*

2) — *From the point of view of morale, the relation of forces has entered a new stage: the enemy has lost not only his offensive spirit but even his will to defend himself.*

3) — *We have aptly applied the notion of supremacy on a given theatre of operations. We have no superiority either in equipment, number of troops, or fire power, but we have overcome these temporary weaknesses, shaken the enemy's morale right from the start, acted on the offensive, conquered supremacy and won the battle.*

"Ba Gia inaugurated a new military phase" (Liberation Radio, June 6, 1965).

*

After the liquidation of the Ngo Dinh Diem clique (November 1, 1963), 1964 and the beginning of 1965 saw six other coups and counter-coups in Saigon. While on the military plane large-scale raids conducted by the Saigon troops ended often in disaster, many posts were annihilated or had to be evacuated and *the puppet army was decimated by whole battalions*. The first half of 1965 ended with a disastrous balance-sheet for Saigon: 90,000 men put out of action, including 20,000 regulars, 3,000 Americans and 300 satellite troops, 180 platoons, 120 companies and 20 battalions wiped out; 296 planes downed, 35 river craft sunk, 20,000 weapons captured, 10 military trains upturned, 396 military vehicles destroyed, among them 89 M.113's.

The system of strategic hamlets set up with so much care by American strategists collapsed under the blows of the guerillas and rural population, bringing with it the complete disintegration of the village puppet administration and civil guard units. By June 1965, 7,000 strategic hamlets had been pulled down, one thousand others were on the verge of collapse, and 13 military sectors and subsectors razed. Even in regions still under Saigon control, the population built combat villages. In some regions, the enemy had to destroy hamlets which he could not defend. The area controlled by the Saigon administration was reduced to one-fifth of the territory with only four million inhabitants (less than one-third of the total population).

Since then the liberated zone comprised both rural and mountain areas; it bordered on big cities like Saigon and Da Nang. Some of these regions extended over one hundred kilometres, others covered 400 or 500 square kilometres. A new society was being built, with social and administrative reforms and economic, cultural and medical achievements which turned the liberated zone into a solid rear for the liberation war. A constant threat now weighed upon the towns, isolated, encircled on all sides, and rocked by the political and military struggles of the townsfolk. The puppet political regime was plunged into an irremediable crisis.

By mid-1965, the special war waged in South Vietnam by half a million puppet troops, equipped and commanded by the Americans, was unquestionably lost. The fiasco was complete :

— The puppet army, set up with so much care, was disintegrating.

— The puppet regime was shaken to its foundations.

— The strategic hamlet program had gone bankrupt.

— The people's forces were stronger than ever and the liberated zone covered nearly four-fifths of the territory with two-thirds of the population.

— The NFL's international prestige was extending while US aggressiveness and barbarity were being exposed.

In a bid to save its stakes, Washington launched its air and naval forces against the DRVN and massively dispatched US troops for a land war in Vietnam, a thing which the Pentagon strategists had tried to avoid. Thus, in face of people's war, the strategy of special war devised by the most brilliant American politicians and generals — Kennedy, Taylor, McNamara — had failed.

NOTES

Why did the Americans fail to fulfil their pacification plan? M. Browne, an AP correspondent who closely followed the operations, has this to say:

"Assaulting a Viet Cong tunnel network is normally an exhausting and bloody business, resulting in heavy friendly casualties. The ground over and near the tunnels is invariably studded with thousands of concealed spike foot traps — another specialty. These traps, made of upright nails with barbed points, easily penetrate the sole of a combat boot, and painfully incapacitate a soldier stepping on one. Sometimes they are treated with tetanus-infected buffalo urine to make their wounds even more dangerous."

(The New Face of War, p. 22-23)

"Mines and booby traps add to the difficulty of clearing a tunnel field, and snipers are invariably posted at ventilation holes.

'One of them stood up and shot at me,' a wounded American captain told me once. 'I saw him and drew a bead, but he ducked down just as I fired. I started moving cautiously toward the place I saw him disappear, when another shot came from another spot about fifty yards away. That was the one that got me. I believe it was the same sniper, using another hole.'

Entrance holes to tunnels or weapons depots are sometimes underwater in the bank of a canal or water hole, and are accessible only to swimmers who know where to look."

(op. cit. p. 23)

"The pilot of a US Army L-19 spotting plane recently watched, in horror as the Viet Cong ambushed a large government unit moving along a road.

'I was flying low over the convoy, and could see everything perfectly. Everything looked normal, and the fields on the side of the road seemed empty,' he said.

'All at once, the whole shoulder of the road, about a half mile long, seemed to lift up and turn into about two hundred men, all of them shooting into the convoy at point-blank range. After the first volley of shots, they charged in and mixed up with the government troops in such close hand-to-hand fighting it all looked like one group. I couldn't have strafed them even if I'd been armed, because I'd have killed government troops too. It was all over quickly, long before reinforcements even got rolling."

(op. cit. p. 26)

"Viet Cong gadgetry begins and ends on the battlefield, while ours begins in America and is adapted, for better or worse, to the Vietnamese jungle. When the American gadget proves inadequate for the task, it is sent back to the drawing boards, some of which are in

Saigon, but most of which are 10,000 miles away. Supply lines are attenuated, and the American military designer lives in a different world from Vietnam. This is in no way a criticism of American guerrilla weapons, some of which are excellent. But it seems to me that men who can design Polaris missiles must have the greatest difficulty adjusting their frames of reference to crossbows. And, unfortunately for us, the crossbow is an eminently more practical weapon in Vietnam than the ballistic missile."

(*Op. cit.* p. 27)

"According to later intelligence, only about two hundred of the guerrillas were armed, regular Viet Cong troops. The rest were peasant youths living in the area, pressed into service by the fighters to serve as coolies in digging foxholes and mine emplacements, and to carry off equipment and bodies. But none of these "extras" turned traitor to their bosses, and all of them worked with the same courage and discipline as the regulars.

No matter how you look at it, this kind of thing is depressing."

(*Op. cit.* p. 69)

"Viet Cong tactical intelligence was excellent. The guerrillas knew exactly when and where the convoy was to go, and they must have known that it would be carrying supplies they wanted, or they would not have mounted such a heavy attack.

Government intelligence was wholly inoperative. Despite the fact that more than a thousand guerrillas and bearers had moved through fairly populous areas near the road, had dug up road shoulders for a half mile to place their mines, and had lain in wait for several hours at least, no word of warning ever reached government authorities. Many peasants and children must have wandered right through the ambush and must have known what was planned, but nothing was said."

(*Op. cit.* p. 68)

Such are, under the pen of an American correspondent, some of the main features of "people's war".