During the period from 30 April to 3 May 1955, governmental forces, composed primarily of the Airborne Brigade, recruit units of Training Center No. 1, a few battalions of the Saigon-Cholon Subdivision, and General Trinh Minh The's Regiment No. 60, attacked the Binh Xuyen stronghold and drove their forces away from Cholon. The Binh Xuyen resisted weakly; some of them surrendered, and the bulk of their forces withdrew into the mangrove area of Rung Sat. During a battle at the Tan Thuan Dong Bridge, Major General Trinh Minh The was killed. Prime Minister Diem promoted him posthumously to the rank of lieutenant general and accorded him the full honors of an official funeral.

From their redoubt in Rung Sat, the Binh Xuyen continued harassing governmental outposts located on the periphery of this area. These activities also impeded shipping movements on the Saigon River. For a short time the Binh Xuyen managed to survive because the government was concentrating its operational efforts against the Hoa Hao in the Mekong Delta. Not until 21 September 1955 did the government take military action to eliminate the Binh Xuyen when Operation Hoang Dieu was launched under the command of Colonel Duong Van Minh, then Commander of the Saigon-Cholon Subdivision.

The objectives of this operation were to destroy the Binh Xuyen's remnant forces, their bases, and supplies and to clear the Saigon River from Nha Be to Vung Tau, restoring normal commercial traffic on this waterway. (Map 1)

To destroy the Binh Xuyen forces, which were scattered over the mangrove jungles and swamps of the Rung Sat area, the operational command first established blocking positions surrounding the entire area of operation. Forces of the Eastern Zone subdivision were employed for this purpose. The blocking forces consisted of:

(1) The Bien Hoa task force, which was composed of 2 battalions and an armored cavalry troop, deployed as a screen on the northwestern side of the area.

(2) The Ba Ria task force, also composed of 2 battalions and an armored cavalry troop, which formed a screen on the eastern side of the area.

(3) A territorial force unit from the My Tho Subdivision which came as reinforcement and established a screen on the western side of the area.
Map 1 – Operation in Rung Sat

PHASE I
- Airborne Advance
- Infantry Advance

PHASE 2
- Airborne Advance
- Infantry Advance
- Screening Units
Two Naval Assault Groups with marine troops on board conducted patrols on waterways crisscrossing the area; they also had the mission to occupy the outposts formerly manned by the Binh Xuyen along the Long Tao River.

The governmental attacking forces consisted of:

(1) Three airborne battalions, Nos. 1, 5 and 6, under the command of Major Nguyen Chanh Thi, then Deputy Commander of the Airborne Brigade.

(2) The 154th Infantry Regiment with two organic battalions, the 58th and 22d, and two attached battalions, the 33d and 809th, all under the command of Major Do Huu Do, Commander of the 154th Regiment.

(3) The 3d Artillery Battalion, reinforced with 2 territorial artillery sections and one battery from the 34th Artillery Battalion, under the command of Major Nguyen Xuan Thinh, Commander of the 3d Artillery Battalion.

(4) A company of M-2 boats operated by the engineers to provide supply, liaison and water storage facilities.

In addition, four observation planes were assigned to the operational command.

After the blocking forces had established their positions on the encirclement belt, the attacking forces began to move into the area in several increments transported by naval craft. The landing of governmental troops was completed during 23 and 24 September, 1955, but no contact was made. The airborne units landed on the Long Tao and Dong Tranh areas while the 154th Regiment landed in the Van Sat River area. During this initial stage of the operation, all activities took place in the western area of Rung Sat.

After landing, the governmental troops moved inward along the waterways. Progress was extremely slow since troops had to wade along swampy banks in deep mud. All elements advanced only about 1 or 2 km in depth, then bivouacked on dry land and established positions to control the accesses from rivers and canals. The operational command's plan was to block all of the accesses inland provided by the channels in this swampy area. Every day, the governmental forces conducted patrols deep inside the area to search for the enemy and posted control parties at channel access points to prevent boats from entering the area and to search those
that came out of it. Boat traffic in this area was primarily an activity of the local population whose livelihood was to cut wood to make charcoal. The operational command was concerned that the Binh Xuyen might take advantage of this boat traffic to resupply and communicate with Saigon.

The only skirmish of the entire operation took place on 27 September 1955 at Rach La when the Binh Xuyen sank one of the government's naval boats with 57-mm recoilless rifle fire. A marine unit was immediately dispatched to the area from where the fire came, and an entire platoon of the Binh Xuyen was destroyed.

The tactic that the operational command used throughout the operation was to encircle the Binh Xuyen, sever their supply lines, and conduct attacks by fire against suspected troop locations, usually at river mouths, channel junctions and along trafficable waterways. An average of 700 artillery rounds was expended per day, mostly with fuses timed to explode overhead. Coverage by observation planes was thorough and permanent during daytime. It was valuable in guiding our artillery fire on suspect boats moving in the enemy-held area. Several Binh Xuyen boats were thus sunk during the operation.

The governmental forces enjoyed another tactical advantage by using the high ground of An Thit for artillery positions. An Thit was in fact the only high ground located in the very midst of the area. From there, government artillery pieces could cover the entire area in every direction. This fire coverage therefore provided the Binh Xuyen no safe havens.

Just one week after the governmental forces encircled and bombarded the area, the Binh Xuyen troops began to surrender. The first unit to do so was an entire outpost garrison located 2 km inside the Vam Sat river mouth. The Binh Xuyen troops who rallied to the government told several stories of privations and disenchantment. In fact, from the time they withdrew into the Rung Sat area, few of them had any heart for continuing the fight, being separated from their families and suffering from malnutrition. The Binh Xuyen unit commanders suspected one another and were all inclined to surrender, except a few die-hard criminals.

From their stories, it was also known that as soon as the Binh Xuyen reached Rung Sat, their leader, Bay Vien, reorganized his forces
into four battalions, totalling about 1,200 men, 2 separate companies and 2 others for the protection of his headquarters, Bay Vien installed his command post on a boat. Even though the Binh Xuyen found Rung Sat a safe haven, they could not stay deep inside the mangrove jungles because of difficulties in moving about. The needs for resupply, movement and observation forced them to establish positions near the river mouths and channel accesses, concealed under foliage and bushes. Their troops lived in primitively erected pile houses nearby to provide protection against the elements and tides. As a result, they had become targets for artillery fire, which was accurately concentrated on their positions. Demoralized and under constant bombardment by governmental forces, the Binh Xuyen disintegrated rapidly.

On 7 October, airborne units and the 154th Regiment redeployed from the western section of Rung Sat after having completely pacified the area. They moved into the eastern section and continued their search there. During this stage, the paratroopers acted as blocking forces while the 154th Regiment was transported by naval craft to the Can Gio estuary and from there its units progressed northward along the Nga Bay River to conduct search activities on both sides of the river.

By the time this second phase of the operation was initiated the Binh Xuyen had disintegrated and most of their troops had rallied to the government. Only a small number was taken as prisoners. The search operations conducted in this phase resulted in the arrest of the Binh Xuyen's last remnants. While all of his troops were either detained or rallied to the government, the Binh Xuyen chieftain, Bay Vien, and a few of his collaborators, such as Lai Huu Tai and Lai Huu Sang, managed to slip out of Rung Sat and later escaped to France.

The Hoang Dieu operation thus completely destroyed the Binh Xuyen. Statistics showed that they suffered 20 killed, 221 detained and 1,199 rallied. Governmental forces seized the entire Binh Xuyen arsenal which consisted of 11 recoilless rifles, six 81-mm mortars, ten 60-mm mortars, 14 rocket launchers, four 20-mm cannons, 35 machineguns, 110 automatic rifles, 343 submachineguns, 1,046 rifles, 4 grenade launchers and 75 pistols. Other materials seized from the Binh Xuyen included a radio.
transmitter and 30 assorted boats and ships. On the government side, the Vietnamese National Armed Forces suffered 10 killed and 59 wounded with one naval craft sunk and four others damaged.

After this victorious campaign, Colonel Duong Van Minh was promoted to major general. Many other officers and troops of the operational units were also promoted or decorated. On 6 November 1955, the victorious force returned to Saigon and paraded amidst cheers and jubilations of the population.

At this time, however, the campaign conducted in the Mekong Delta to eliminate the rebellious Hoa Hao elements still fell short of its objectives even after six months of operation. Code-named Dinh Tien Hoang, this campaign had begun on 23 May 1955 under the command of Colonel Duong Van Duc with the commitment of 12 infantry battalions and territorial forces. The governmental forces achieved some military success after disrupting the opposing units and destroying their installations and combat morale but at the same time they also alienated the local population with their harsh and indiscriminating methods. It was widely believed then that the government wanted to annihilate all religious sects without discrimination or mercy. As a result, President Diem ordered Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, the victor of the Binh Xuyen, to take over the conduct of operations.

As soon as General Minh established his field command post, which was called Headquarters, Combined Western and Dong Thap Combat Zones, in Long Xuyen Province, he initiated a new operational campaign, code-named Nguyen Hue, on 1 January 1956. This campaign sought to achieve the following objectives:

(1) To solve the problem of Tran Van Soai, Ba Cut and dissident elements of religious sects.

(2) To destroy Viet Minh organizations and their planted cadres in the Mekong Delta.

(3) To reestablish government control over the Dong Thap and Ca Mau areas and to develop roads, bridges, and military outposts in these areas.
Since the scope of his mission was so large and the area of responsibility encompassed so many different locations, General Minh decided to assign a different area of operation for each of his subordinate commanders, in order to deal effectively with each group of dissidents.

Thus, the western Zone, which was the area of operation of the on-going Dinh Tien Hoang Campaign, remained under Colonel Duong Van Duc. Lt. Colonel Nguyen Van La was assigned the Dong Thap Combat Zone while the Vinh Long area was placed under the command of Colonel Nguyen Van Quang.

The government committed in the Nguyen Hue campaign a sizeable force which also included naval and air force units.

Army units included four infantry divisions and territorial regiments. The 4th Field Division and the 11th Light Division were assigned to the Western Zone area of operation while the 14th and 15th Light Divisions were assigned to the Dong Thap area of operation.

Naval forces consisted of four Naval Assault Divisions, the 21st, 22d, 23d, and 24th, and two LSIL, one LSSL and three LCU. Because of its terrain, the Dong Thap area of operation was assigned three naval assault divisions, one LCU and 20 M-2 boats.

Air Force units participating in the campaign included one flight of observation planes and three bombers of the Marcel Dassault type.

In addition, the infantry units were supported by six squadrons of scoutcars and five artillery battalions (the 3d, 4th, 21st, 22d and 24th). One airborne battalion made up the campaign's reserve at Sa Dec.

Under General Minh's command, the Nguyen Hue campaign was a complete success after one and a half months of operation. By 17 February 1956, almost all objectives had been achieved and the dissidents practically eliminated. Losses inflicted on the dissidents amounted to 268 killed, 3,750 ralliers, and 2,719 assorted weapons captured. Friendly forces suffered 31 killed, 115 wounded, 7 missing in action and 11 weapons lost.

At the beginning of the campaign, General Minh believed he could rally the dissidents under Mr. Tran Van Soai without bloodshed. First, he directed governmental forces to encircle and isolate Mr. Soai's troops.
Then after showing the dissidents that they had no way of escaping, he began prodding Mr. Soai for a negotiated surrender. After several secret contacts with General Minh's representatives, finally Soai agreed to meet with Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Tho, President Diem's special envoy. He laid down some conditions for his surrender which were all met by the government. Then on 17 February 1956, Mr. Soai and his troops officially surrendered and rallied to the government.

The same tactic of pressure and negotiations was used to win over General Le Quang Vinh, alias Ba Cut, who was perhaps the most recalcitrant among the Hoa Hao dissident leaders. Ba Cut also agreed to meet with President Diem's envoy, but set several extravagant conditions for his return. He was finally caught by a Civil Guard reconnaissance squad on 13 April 1956 at Chac Ca Dao in Long Xuyen Province. Convicted by the Criminal Court and a military tribunal of rebellion and treason, Ba Cut was sentenced to death and executed on 13 July 1956 at Can Tho.

Eliminating the dissidents was perhaps not too difficult a problem for the government since the rebellious forces were no match for the governmental forces. But the same governmental forces who had defeated the Binh Xuyen, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, did not have the same self-assurance when it came time to confront the Communists. The following event proved that defeat was often the result of poor leadership.

*Performance of the 7th Division in the Battle of Ap Bac*

While in command of the 7th Infantry Division, Major General Huynh Van Cao initiated a pattern of activity which in time became an established routine for the division. He would commemorate every important national event such as the National Day or President Diem's birthday by conducting an operation of political significance. When he left the 7th Division to command IV Corps, General Cao was replaced by Colonel Bui Dinh Dam, also a presidential appointee like himself. Both were Roman Catholic, loyal to the regime and no doubt high-ranking members of the all-powerful Can Lao Party.
Soon after becoming commander of the 7th Division, Colonel Dam thought of a military exploit which could be offered to President Diem as a present on his birthday, 3 January, 1963. It so happened that two days before that, an observation plane had spotted about 100 VC in the village of Ap Bac in Dinh Tuong Province. This surely looked like an easy win and Colonel Dam decided to launch an operation the next day, 2 January after some planning. During the previous night, he landed an element of his division on an area north of the Ap Bac Village. At the same time, a second element moved to south of the village by trucks while a third element established a screen on the highway east of the village. For this operation, Colonel Dam had committed three battalions of the 12th Regiment, two ranger companies, four Civil Guard Companies, 13 M-114 APC's and six 105-mm howitzers.

At 0600 hours, after all ARVN elements had taken up their assigned positions around the village, the operation began with half an hour of intense preparatory fire against the target by the air force and artillery. Then Colonel Dam gave the orders for an infantry assault which was conducted by two Civil Guard companies. The enemy force inside the village was estimated at about 200, well entrenched in communication trenches, foxholes and defense positions. This preparedness indicated that perhaps the enemy had advance information on the ARVN operation. Not until our troops had progressed near the village did the enemy open fire. From the very first minutes of the engagement, 40 of the government troops had been put out of action. Overwhelmed by a heavy fire from the village, the two Civil Guard Companies fell back and two others made the assault. The enemy employed the same tactic: he would wait until the troops came to close proximity of the village and only then would he open fire. After the failure of the two initial infantry assaults, the 7th Division commander decided to land new troops in the village by helicopters. Three helicopters with ARVN troops aboard were immediately downed by enemy 37-mm antiaircraft fire; others were forced to a safer altitude. In a second landing attempt, two more helicopters were downed and the landing was aborted. During the following hour, the 7th Division launched simultaneous attacks from the south, the north
and the east, but they all ended in failure. The next phase of attacks by ARVN forces involved four companies which had not been previously committed; still they made no significant headway.

By this time, the IV Corps commander had flown in to observe the battle and perhaps to give Colonel Dam a helping hand. A new phase of attack began with 20 minutes of artillery preparatory fire on enemy positions; well over 200 rounds were expended. This time, the 7th Division commander employed a total of eight companies for the assault against the village. The ARVN troops attacked desperately but in vain. Finally, it was decided to spearhead the attack by armored personnel carriers with infantry troops aboard and following in their wake. The enemy still persisted in employing the same tactic. When the armored personnel carriers came to within range, four of them received direct hits and caught fire; four others were damaged. The final attack thus came to a complete stop.

In the face of continued failure, IV Corps requested the JGS for reinforcements. In the afternoon, it was decided to airdrop a battalion of paratroopers over the target area. The battalion was the only reserve force left at that time, the three other airborne battalions and the brigade commander were being committed to an operation in War Zone C in Tay Ninh Province. From the way the enemy reacted to the airdrop operation, there was a possibility that our communications had been intercepted and the enemy had known our airdrop plan and even the drop zone as well in advance. As a result, as soon as our paratroopers left the airplanes and were dangling in the air, they were immediately fired upon by the enemy from the ground. Despite heavy casualties, the airborne battalion succeeded in assembling its troops upon touching ground and made an effort to carry out its mission. But it was dark and the paratroopers' attack was not as successful as planned. Taking advantage of darkness, the enemy force slipped out of the village during the night. The next morning when the paratroopers went on the attack, they found no enemy resistance at all. Total ARVN casualties during this battle, both killed and wounded amounted to approximately 400. It was later known that the enemy force inside Ap Bac village
was the 512th Mobile Battalion of My Tho Province, whose estimated strength was about 300. It also appeared that the enemy had known about the 7th Division's operational plan against Ap Bac and had brought in reinforcements.

Military Province Chiefs

During President Diem's tenure of office, his administration was characterized by the appointment of several senior ARVN officers as province chiefs. This practice was continued by successive governments after him and in time all province chiefs were military officers.

The appointment of senior ARVN officers as province chiefs under President Diem was dictated by the shortage of able administrators and the insecure situation which prevailed in remote areas, especially those just recovered from Viet Minh control. By 1963, only 5 province chiefs were civilians; the remaining ones were all military.

Provinces were placed under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. A province chief was assisted by two deputies: a deputy for administration, and a deputy for security, always a military officer. In large provinces where the enemy presence was strong, the province chief was assigned a special assistant who was responsible for the two or three districts considered the most insecure.

If all province chiefs abided by the normal administrative system and reported solely to the Minister of the Interior, there would perhaps have been no problems. But presidential decree No. 57A issued in 1957 made it all too clear that the province chief was the President's representative in his province. As a result, several province chiefs considered themselves and actually acted as sovereigns in their own kingdoms, bypassing ministerial channels, and were not very respectful of higher ranking military authorities. A worst case in point was the province chief of Long An, then Colonel Mai Ngoc Duoc, who acted as if he were the President himself. His attitude resulted in serious clashes with the Minister of Interior and even with the III Corps commander.
One example of effective small-unit leadership was provided by Captain Nguyen Van Tu, who commanded the 713th Infantry Battalion. This battalion was one of the two ordered by the Western Zone Command to relieve the pressure exerted by rebel units on our outposts in the Nam Thai Son area during the second phase of operation Dinh Tien Hoang (September-December, 1955). Captain Tu and most of his men were native of the same Lang Son Province in North Vietnam. During all the battles that this battalion fought against the rebels, Captain Tu always personally led his troops, arranged their formation in lines abreast and took the lead in making assaults to the sounds of the bugle. Because of his courage and this daring method of combat, his battalion soon got rid of cowardly soldiers, who usually deserted, and those who remained with the battalion were all courageous combatants.

Against the rebels who encircled our outposts Captain Tu also employed his usual tactic of deploying his troops in lines abreast, disregarding roads and marching them cross-country over ricefields. As a result, within just two days, the 713th Battalion had crossed over seven canals and engaged the enemy in close combat at each contact. Overawed by this audacity, the Hoa Hao rebels broke ranks and disintegrated. In this operation alone, the 713th Battalion eliminated in excess of 100 rebels but also suffered as many as 70 casualties, both killed and wounded. Later, Captain Tu was promoted to full colonel rank and placed in command of an infantry regiment of the 5th Division. He was killed during the battle of Dau Tieng in 1966.

Another example of effective leadership was provided by Major Du Quoc Dong (later lieutenant general) who commanded the 1st Airborne Battalion and led it to a resounding victory in Kien Phong Province in 1961. This battalion was then attached to IV Corps and was operating in the area where the boundaries of Kien Phong, Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong Provinces met. For a few days prior to the battle, the battalion made no contact with the enemy and on the eve of the battle bivouacked in a small village. On the next morning when the
battalion was preparing to leave the village and continue the operation, it discovered the sudden presence of a large group of armed men moving out of a village about three km away. Through observation by binoculars, Major Dong suspected that these men were not ARVN troops, but he was not positive. He calmly gave orders for his men to prepare for combat and waited. The enemy force now came nearer and was estimated at about a battalion moving toward the friendly positions over open fields. Now, it headed toward another village about 200 m away. When the enemy force came out of that village in the open and after Major Dong was certain that it was not any ARVN unit, he gave orders for the paratroopers to attack. Although being taken by surprise on its flank, the enemy battalion rapidly moved sideways to face the airborne troops and calmly fought back. A fierce firefight ensued which soon turned into close combat on an open field. After nearly half an hour of fierce combat, the enemy battalion commander was killed and his forces almost completely annihilated. The victorious paratroopers of the 1st Battalion seized the entire armament of the enemy battalion and thus scored the first major victory in the annals of the ARVN Airborne Brigade.

In the two foregoing examples, despite the difference in combat tactics, both the commanders of the 713th Infantry and the 1st Airborne Battalions proved to be excellent combat leaders. They both made timely decisions, remained cool when making contact with the enemy and gave their troops a model of personal courage and dedication. But these virtues alone could not bring about success in combat. They also took good care of their units, looked after the well-being of their troops and trained them well.

Observations

These examples I have selected reflect certain aspects of military leadership during President Diem's administration, especially leadership at division and higher levels. During that period, military
leadership was molded by the influence of several factors. First, the RVNAF, being an offspring of the French Expeditionary Corps in Indochina, were still very much influenced by French methods of operation and the French approach to command and leadership despite the fact that they had been reorganized and trained in the American way. Second, for more than a year after they had become fully autonomous, the RVNAF functioned practically as an instrument of the regime which used them for political purposes. The use of ARVN forces to eliminate the dissident religious sects was an example, but this challenge did not provide a full measure of military leadership since the armed rebels did not enjoy popular support and militarily they were no match for the better-equipped and superior governmental forces. The true test of military leadership was evidenced only by a few significant combat engagements, and although communist insurgency was still in the developing stage, there were already indications that the command and control system did not lend itself to effective military leadership.

In the first place, the Joint General Staff, which was supposed to function as a command body, did not enjoy true authority in the military hierarchy. It was just an intermediary between the President and field units. Some of the vital functions that were needed for its effective operation and control such as personnel administration, political warfare and military security were all performed by the Ministry of Defense.

By far the most important function to exercise control over the armed forces was the promotion of officers and their assignment to key positions. But this was an authority enjoyed by the Directorate of Personnel of the Ministry of Defense and all final decisions on promotion or assignment were made by the President himself. Initially, the promotion of general officers was invariably dictated by political motives. President Diem, for example, freely handed out general ranks to several military chieftains of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. The assignment of officers to key command positions was also a process of clanish political considerations aimed primarily at strengthening the
regime. Usually, such appointments were based on three criteria: first, the candidate had to be a native of Central Vietnam who had proved his loyalty to the regime; second, he had to be a Roman Catholic and finally, a member of the Can Lao Party. There were of course exceptions to this rule but at least those selected for key positions had to meet one of the three criteria. The same rule applied to promotion which in addition to these criteria, also required that the candidate had some military achievement to show for his records.

This method of assignment and promotion naturally produced an army of sycophants whose primary preoccupation was to please the President and earn his trust and esteem. Some unit commanders even doctored combat reports, exaggerating enemy losses while minimizing their own, just to impress the President. But unless they were extremely skillful and adept, it was not always easy to do this because the President could always check their reports through MAAG or through his own reporting channels, which could be the Can Lao party or the military security system.

For the elimination of the rebellious sects, the government had committed corps-size forces, but its success, as has been said, derived partially from the fact that the rebellious forces were both demoralized and ill-equipped. In fact, these operations could be considered as simple field exercises with the difference that there was a real enemy and real ammunition was fired. However, credit must be given to those operational commanders who had proved their skills and initiatives during combat. Colonel Minh's initiative to encircle the Binh Xuyen and employ artillery to harass their morale, for example, had led to their early surrender. His initiative was tactically sound because the swampy terrain of Rung Sat did not lend itself to a thorough search by infantry forces.

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8 Vietnamese officers jokingly called this the "Three-D system": Dao (religion), Du (obscene word used by natives of Central Vietnam) and Dang (party).
A post-mortem analysis of the Dinh Tien Hoang campaign also revealed the skills of field commanders, who by using politics and diplomacy, had won over the rebel leader, Mr. Soai, at minimal costs to the government. At the brigade level, Colonel Do Cao Tri, the Airborne Brigade Commander, provided another fine example of courage and initiative when he took upon himself the responsibility for attacking and clearing the Binh Xuyen from the Saigon-Cholon area although the government was still reluctant to give him the orders.

The assignment of major unit commanders based on the three criteria mentioned above produced another adverse effect on the performance of the armed forces. Those who did not qualify for these positions became disenchanted; they were convinced that they could do better than those who had been selected. And among those who had been selected, a few certainly did not measure up to their tasks. The colonel selected for command of the 7th Division, for example, was perhaps an excellent staff officer, but as a tactical commander, he had proved inadequate in combat skills and experience. When placed in command of a division, he did not know how to use his forces effectively. His most serious mistake in the battle of Ap Bac was the failure to overwhelm the enemy from the very beginning with a superior infantry-armor force. His piecemeal, hesitant commitment of inadequate forces in successive assault attempts gave the enemy ample time for reorganizing and recovering. His second mistake was to select both the landing zone and the dropping zone in too close proximity of enemy positions. Also, he had directed the main attack against a point where the enemy’s defenses appeared to be the strongest. In addition to these tactical blunders, the commander was perhaps not aware of the fact that the shortage of combat-experienced non-commissioned officers in his units also contributed very significantly to his ineffective infantry assaults and the overall performance of his division.

The same problem of presidential interference which inhibited the authority of the JGS also seriously affected the administrative control system and greatly reduced the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Although they were subordinated to this ministry, most
province chiefs, who were all presidential nominees, reported directly to the President from whom they also received orders. And although the great majority of province chiefs were military officers, they seemed oblivious to that fact and behaved as if they were civilians and career civil servants. Because of this misconception, some of them always donned civilian clothes, grew their hair long and were disrespectful of higher ranking officers. Fortunately, those mandarin-minded military province chiefs were only a few exceptions in the total. Many province chiefs in fact took their roles seriously and achieved significant improvements in their areas of responsibility.

But while command and leadership at the top and higher levels of the military hierarchy were to some extent under the influence of political dictates, the lower levels were not affected by it. In several small units, the principles of military leadership were respected and produced magnificent results.

As a conclusion to this chapter, I think that the principles of leadership and the virtues required of a good leader outlined in Chapter I provide a sound basis for effective command. But no leader, regardless of how close to perfect he is, can ever possess all of these desirable qualities to the same degree and always abide by all of the principles set forth. As the examples of leadership narrated in this chapter have demonstrated, I believe that every commander who wants to succeed should endeavor as much as he can to faithfully observe these principles and constantly develop the traits of a good leader.
CHAPTER III

Leadership During the Period of the Directorate

Background

Following the successful coup of November 1963 in which both President Diem and his brother Nhu found tragic death, the military junta set about reestablishing order and government with strong popular support and high hopes. Promising elections and a return to civilian rule within twelve months, the junta disbanded the National Assembly and replaced it by a Military Revolutionary Council (MRC) composed mostly of junta members and chaired by General Duong Van Minh, who also became chief of state. A new cabinet was formed, headed by Prime Minister Nguyen Ngoc Tho, Diem's vice-president, and key ministries such as Defense, Interior and Information were taken over by generals. To erase the image of the old regime, the new government disbanded the secret police, the National Revolutionary Movement, the Can Lao Party and the Women's Solidarity Movement. A Council of Notables, composed of respected academic and professional personalities, was created to draft a new constitution, but it disintegrated into futile debates. Efforts to strengthen and consolidate political organizations also ended in failure while generals maneuvered for greater power.

In the immediate aftermath of the military coup and under the new military government, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces underwent a radical change and were never the same again. There was a sudden awareness of political power among the officer corps, especially the generals, and anyone ambitious enough could always expect high returns in terms of money and position. Those who had taken part in the coup, directly or indirectly, were awarded with double, even triple promotions. Several officers were suddenly promoted simply by being relatives of
or connected with junta members. During a nostalgic visit to his former division a high ranking junta member brought along rank insignia by the bags and distributed them freely as if they were souvenirs. This promotion spree created quite a crisis in rank value and seriously undermined military discipline and leadership. In the eyes of the uninvolved officers, this was perhaps the most irresponsible act on the part of the victorious generals, a vindication that betrayed their own ambitions and unruliness. By comparison, Diem's much criticized promotion criteria looked rather benign since the recipients were but a selected few. Gradually, the military splintered into small "centers of power", each evolving around an original junta member, and picking up new loyalties as it grew and expanded.

Before General Minh could implement a reform program, he was pushed aside on January 30, 1964, by General Nguyen Khanh. The pretext was a rumored neutralist coup by other members of the junta following an unpopular French proposal for neutralization of Vietnam. After exiling the suspected generals to Dalat, Khanh persuaded Minh to remain chief of state, while Khanh became premier and chairman of the MRC.

Proclaiming an anti-Communist, anti-neutralist and anti-French policy, Khanh advanced a program of urban and rural development. He promised a civilian government with a constitution but dismissed the Council of Notables previously assigned this task. All able-bodied citizens were ordered mobilized for military service or "New Life" Hamlets development.¹

Meanwhile, most of South Vietnam's Buddhists sects and organizations joined the United Buddhist Church (UBC). To appease the Buddhists, Khanh, himself a Buddhist, recognized the UBC and donated land for a national pagoda. Khanh also cancelled the Catholics' favored legal status and authorized a Buddhist chaplain corps for the armed forces. Despite these gestures, Buddhists soon charged Khanh with repression.

¹New Life or Tan Sinh was the new name used for the former Strategic Hamlets. The basic concept and organization of the system remained unchanged.
Taking advantage of these disruptive forces, the Viet Cong stepped up their activities. Infiltration from North Vietnam of about 2,000 per month was matched by local recruitment. Increasing quantities of Communist-bloc weapons arrived by land and sea. In response, U.S. advisory and combat support personnel increased to over 22,000 by the end of 1964. Following the attack by North Vietnam's PT boats on two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in August, U.S. aircraft bombed North Vietnamese naval bases. President Johnson took this occasion to assure the world that the United States would stay in Southeast Asia as long as the struggle required and would meet aggression with firmness and unprovoked attack with measured retaliation.

General Khanh, apparently considering the moment opportune for establishing a dictatorship, declared a national emergency and assumed total authority. Next came the constitution, the infamous "Vung Tau Charter," which gave nearly absolute powers to the president. To this position, the MRC elected Khanh, displacing Minh. Outraged students demonstrated, joined and encouraged by Buddhist monks who charged repression by former Can Lao and Diemists.

Faced with continuing strife and Buddhist intransigence, Khanh withdrew the Vung Tau Charter and resigned. For an interim government, the MRC selected a triumvirate—Generals Minh, Khanh and Khiem. After a rest in Dalat, during which Saigon remained in chaos and Buddhists in Hue and Da Nang organized "revolutionary committees," Khanh returned to bring temporary order. He promised a civilian government and a national congress, but when he organized an interim cabinet with heavy civilian representation, the generals eliminated from power seized Saigon on September 13, 1964. Khanh was in Dalat, but some younger officers, including Air Commodore Nguyen Cao Ky, opposed the dissidents. Ky's support proved decisive, for the armed planes circling over the coup headquarters brought capitulation without bloodshed.

While the young officers exerted a growing political influence, a High National Council (HNC) appointed by Minh completed provisional organization of a civilian government. The transfer took place October 26, with the HNC's chairman, Phan Thanh Suu, replacing General Minh as chief of state. Former Saigon mayor Tran Van Huong became prime minister.
with a civilian cabinet of "technicians". Khanh remained commander-in-chief and head of a new Armed Forces Council, while Minh and Khiem were assigned abroad as ambassadors.

A combination of factors doomed civilian government. Catholic and Buddhist groups, their differences intensified and political ambitions whetted by the summer's riots, demonstrated against Huong, charging they had not been adequately consulted on political matters. They organized student demonstrations in Da Nang, Hue and Saigon, sacked the USIS library and cultural center in Hue and demonstrated in front of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Promising to restore order, Khanh induced the Armed Forces Council to dismiss the Huong government in late January.

In mid-February, a joint military-civilian Legislative Council was set up and a new cabinet formed under Dr. Phan Huy Quat, a former foreign minister. Quat's largely civilian cabinet attempted a balanced representation of minority religious groups with a Buddhist majority. Almost immediately a pro-Catholic faction attempted another coup. While it failed to take over the government, the coup did oust General Khanh, who in fifteen months had antagonized every faction. Though "honorably exiled" as an ambassador-at-large, Khanh was later charged with misuse of government funds and took refuge in France.

On May 20, a group of junior officers and civilians was charged with plotting to assassinate the premier. Their arrests increased Catholic agitation and forced a cabinet crisis into the open when Chief of State Phan Khac Suu refused to recognize Premier Quat's right to dismiss cabinet officers. Unable to reconcile their difference, both Suu and Quat turned over power to the "Young Turk" generals who accepted it and installed a war cabinet on June 11, 1965.

Ten of the young generals formed a National Leadership Committee. 2

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2 Members of the National Leadership Committee or Directorate included:

Chairman: Lt. General Nguyen Van Thieu
Deputy: Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky
Secretary General: Lt. General Pham Xuan Chieu
Members: Lt. General Nguyen Huu Co, General Cao Van Vien

The four corps commanders
General Nguyen Van Thieu became chief of state while Air Vice Marshal
Nguyen Cao Ky became prime minister. Ky entered enthusiastically into
his duties. He declared war on North Vietnam to put the country on a
war footing and broke relations with France. He doubled the soldier's
pay, halved that of high officials, and offered a program of austerity
and reform. He also attacked war profiteering and graft.

When Ky became premier, the Communists appeared to have raised the
insurgency to phase three, the general offensive. Government control
of the delta had declined until the major cities were virtually besieged.
North Vietnam's growing infiltration of military and political personnel
and supplies combined with the political chaos in the South had brought
staggering Viet Cong victories during the first half of 1965.

To help counter this escalation, the United States introduced
combat forces into South Vietnam during the spring of 1965. By early
1967, U.S. strength in Vietnam had risen to nearly 400,000 men, not
including the Seventh Fleet operating offshore. In addition, 44,000
Koreans, 4,000 Australians, and small New Zealand, Philippines, and
Thai contingents had joined the allied forces. The South Vietnamese
Army (ARVN) had grown to 343,000 regular and 300,000 paramilitary
troops. The burden of fighting communist main forces was to be under-
taken by the allied troops, while the Vietnamese Army would support
pacification in the lowlands by fighting the guerrillas and working
with rural development activities. On the government side, the Ministry
of Rural Development trained approximately 30,000 rural development
(RD) personnel to bring social, economic, and political reforms to the
villages. Armed platoons of about 60 persons, divided into specialized
teams, organized village defenses, stimulated self-help projects to
build housing and improve agriculture, surveyed villagers' needs and
desires, and ferreted out the Viet Cong infrastructure.

At the Honolulu conference in February 1966, Generals Ky and Thieu
and other top Vietnamese leaders met with their American counterparts,
including President Johnson and four cabinet secretaries. The con-
ference placed U.S. support behind the Ky government, but emphasized
not merely military victory but also reconstruction and South Vietnam's
social and political reform. The Honolulu Declaration committed the Ky government to encourage national unity and broaden popular participation in nation-building by a democratic constitution and an elective government.

After returning from Honolulu, Ky reshuffled his cabinet to emphasize "social revolution" and began plans for constituent assembly elections. But the Honolulu pledges opened the flood gates of political agitation as various groups sought to seize the political initiative. A political-religious confrontation was touched off in March 1966 by the dismissal of General Nguyen Chanh Thi, who treated the First Corps Area as a fief and ignored Premier Ky's orders. Militant students and Buddhist leaders in Hue and Da Nang led by Thich Tri Quang organized massive protest demonstrations supporting Thi and demanding the removal of Chief of State Thieu.

Proceeding with his program despite a militant Buddhist boycott, Premier Ky in April convened a representative congress which recommended plans for elections and the time and manner for transfer to civilian rule. An election law drafting committee assembled in May. The Election Law promulgated June 19 created 117 electoral districts with nine reserved for Montagnards. The new constituent assembly was elected on September 11, 1966 with the mission to draft a new constitution. Then on April 1, 1967, the government promulgated the new constitution of Vietnam. On September 3 1967, General Thieu was elected president and Air Vice Marshal Ky vice-president.

Manpower and Training

The RVNAF in the meantime had expanded from 395,000 to 643,000 to include 343,000 for the Army. During 1965, the total number of ARVN combat battalions had increased from 119 to 150. The next force structure increase for 1966 was used to replenish understrength units and to serve as a replacement pipeline. By the end of 1967, newly activated units were added to the total RVNAF force structure, to include one infantry regiment, one artillery battalion (105-mm howitzers), one marine bat-
talion, four psywar battalions and 81 Regional Force companies (used in pacification activities).

As the RVNAF force structure increased to meet the requirements of intensified war, the shortage of manpower began to surface as a serious problem which impeded recruitment and replacement. The JGS was confronted with significant difficulties in keeping up with the development trends but with innovative measures and the helping hand extended by MACV, it was finally able to achieve remarkable results.

Limitations in manpower resources were the main obstacle. This stemmed from anachronistic military service laws which were promulgated a decade earlier and included too many loopholes, making deferment and exemption easily obtainable by youths of draft age. Then there was the problem of draft dodgers, which further drained the manpower resources. To remedy these problems, a new mobilization law, called the "Citizen's Duties Act", was promulgated on 6 April 1964. This law determined that all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 25 were required to perform military service duties for a period of two years either in the armed forces or in civil defense organizations. At the same time, amnesty was given to those youths who had been convicted of insubordination and draft evasion, with the purpose of turning these fugitives into recruits. Still, at the end of 1965, a modest estimate put the number of draft dodgers at large at 200,000.

For the effective enforcement of the new mobilization law, a Mobilization Directorate was created in August under the Ministry of Defense to coordinate recruiting and draft activities. A new procedure of collective call was instituted and special police operations were conducted across the country to search for draft fugitives. As a result of these measures and new harsh punitive sentences, the total

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3Mandatory military service was subsequently increased to 3 years for enlisted men and 4 years for officers and NCOs.
number of recruits increased considerably, exceeding requirements by
the end of 1964. But perhaps because of the prevailing political
instability, manpower shortage became a problem again during 1965. As
a consequence, the draft age was gradually raised to 26, then 27 and
finally 33 in 1967.

Another equally debilitating problem that gave rise to manpower
shortages was desertion. In South Vietnam, desertion had taken on an
unusual dimension and aspect of its own because of the protracted war
which seemed to have no end in sight and to increase constantly in in-
tensity. Adding to the hazards of the war, there were economic hardships
created by skyrocketing prices which made the life of servicemen in-
creasingly miserable. Those were the major reasons that edged the South
Vietnamese soldier into desertion. There were of course other causes
for desertion such as family separation, and, poor leadership by unit
commanders. But it also seemed that a society which was generally
indifferent to the war efforts and practically protected draft evaders
and deserters could be a significant factor that encouraged desertion
or at least made it less culpable.

To solve this perennial and nearly insoluble problem, the JGS had
gone all out in its efforts, stressing the importance of effective
leadership at all echelons. The first step it took was to establish
anti-desertion committees at all levels in the military hierarchy down
to the brigade. The mission of each committee was to monitor the
monthly strength status of the unit, see to it that all measures were
properly taken to prevent and deter desertion and determine if these
measures were effective enough to recommend changes and improvement.

A preventive program called "New Horizon" was initiated during
1966 to provide guidance for small units in the implementation of
various tasks designed to educate and improve the living standards of
servicemen. These tasks included: improving food and food service
by the creation of food committees to look after the procurement
of fresh food and supervise cooking and the serving of meals; creating
farming committees to plant vegetables, raise pigs and chicken as sup-
plementary sources of food; improving the issuing of individual clothing
to avoid raggedness and abuse; improving the mail delivery system; organizing variety shows and competitive games to entertain and improve the physical health of servicemen; conducting story-telling sessions in which servicemen were encouraged to tell stories about national heroes of the past, about local sceneries in order to foster patriotism and attachment to the homeland; conducting personal interviews with individual servicemen to determine the problems they had and what kind of help they needed; visiting the sick and wounded being hospitalized; conducting education sessions on the duties and responsibilities of each serviceman in the maintenance of unit discipline, on punitive measures against the crime of desertion and on Communist tricks to induce desertion. As a result of this intensive program, the monthly rate of desertion decreased markedly, from 16.2% in 1966 to 10.5% in 1967.

Another problem that resulted from the rapid expansion of the RVNAF force structure, which practically doubled within just four years, was the shortage of cadres at the small-unit level. Because it was impossible to obtain experienced cadres in a short time, the usual procedure used in the activation of new units was to provide them with a nucleus of cadres taken from existing units. This was a problem faced by the Airborne Brigade when it was authorized to activate new battalions. Since there was a requirement for newly activated airborne battalions to be combat ready in a short time, several combat experienced officers and NCOs from existing battalions were assigned to them at first. This technique provided a command framework which gradually developed into a full strength unit as newly trained recruits and officers arrived. This process provided for an even distribution of experienced and green cadres in each unit but the immediate result was that all units suffered from a temporary lowering in combat effectiveness during the initial stage. The same procedure also applied to other units of the RVNAF. And when the RVNAF doubled in strength, naturally their combat effectiveness had to decrease accordingly for a short time because of the dilution of experienced cadres.
The JGS was acutely aware of this problem and concentrated its efforts during 1966 to improving command and leadership at the small unit level. A Handbook for Small-Unit Commanders was published to provide the necessary guidance for effective leadership. Among other things, this handbook placed emphasis on the qualities required of a leader, the things that he had to know about his subordinates, the things he should do to earn their respect and loyalty, what he should do when taking over command of a new unit, how to organize and conduct a combat operation, how he should exercise the authority of his command, and finally what indications he should look for to determine whether his unit was well led.

During this same period, there were also improvements in personnel administration. These improvements included a career management program for officers, making public promotion procedures for officers and NCOs, proper use of efficiency reports with emphasis on education, on combat exploits, etc. For the first time, the promotion of officers and NCOs ceased to be a secret process during which debates were held in closed sessions. Now it became a matter of public debates, and every serviceman knew exactly why he was or was not promoted.

In addition to these innovative efforts, the JGS also endeavored to improve the living standards for the private soldiers in the field. Foremost among these tasks were the creation of the commissary system and the construction of new barracks and dependent housing. The success of these undertakings were made possible by substantial funds provided by MACV. For example, MACV had set aside a fund of 42 million dollars for the tax-exempt import of canned food such as condensed milk, cooking oil, fish and meat. These food items were sold back at a low price for servicemen to augment their nutrition. The income from this sale served as operating funds for the Commissary Department to procure locally-produced basic commodities such as sugar, rice and salt.

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4 See Annex A.
A valuable area of assistance provided by MACV was the evaluation of RVNAF units and unit commanders. It was a task performed by the U.S. advisory system which had by then extended down to the battalion level. MACV also recommended corrective measures to improve leadership at all levels and this involved the appointment, promotion or reassignment of capable officers and the removal of incompetent ones. These recommendations were always welcomed by the JGS and taken into serious consideration. Those units which performed poorly or could not maintain adequate combat strength were reproved and advised to take remedial actions within a certain time. If no improvements came about after this time, these units might face the penalty of having American support removed. This penalty was deemed necessary because MACV was responsible for the effective management of military assistance funds and equipment.

The selection of officer candidates which so far had been based primarily on academic achievements was for some time criticized as being a form of favoritism which impeded the promotion of the less educated but combat experienced enlisted men. As a remedy, in 1966, the JGS instituted special officer training courses for those enlisted men having the rank of corporal first class or sergeant who had at least two years of service and were rated excellent. By the end of that year, more than 2,000 qualified enlisted men had become officers who, by virtue of their combat records, added tremendously to the effective performance of small units.

More emphasis on command and leadership was also introduced into the training curricula of military schools and training centers during the same year. An extensive revision of training programs was conducted which sought to lay a solid foundation for the formation of good leaders at the small unit level. Instruction on the principles of leadership and the leader's qualities now became an important part of the training process that NCO and officer candidates had to undergo. It was realized that for the RVNAF to improve during the years ahead, leadership training should be made mandatory at that stage of character formation. As a result, in early 1967, the National Military Academy began to institute a four-year curriculum which in most aspects was
similar to West Point's. More funds were allocated to the academy for the preparation and publication of textbooks, primarily those on science and mathematics. Upon graduation, the cadets not only received their officer commissions but also a bachelor's degree in science. Spurred on by these rewards, more students applied for admission, which by the end of 1967 showed a 40% increase over the previous year.

Other military schools underwent the same process of reorganization and improvement. The RVNAF training base therefore was consolidated and became better. The Command and Staff College, for example, admitted only those officers who had good service records and met all the requirements for admission. This was a far cry from the previous years when the college earned the notoriety of being a dumping ground for undesirable elements of the officer corps. New instructors were also assigned to the college; they were generally selected from among those who had graduated from the U.S. Army Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. Finally, the college curriculum was revised and upgraded to reflect modern warfare trends and new concepts of military operations. To meet the need for a new, enlightened class of leaders, the GVN inaugurated the National Defense College (NDC) in August, 1967 destined to become the nation's highest educational institution. The NDC provided a one-year curriculum in defense, strategy and national security affairs for high-ranking military officers and civil servants selected to hold key positions after graduation.

The political aspect of insurgency warfare impelled the JGS from the early 60's to search for an ideological basis to motivate officers and men in the struggle against communism. Toward that end, one of our staunchest anti-communist allies, the Republic of China, agreed to assist the RVNAF by providing advisers and instruction in political warfare theory. General Wang Sheng, a prominent Nationalist Chinese theoretician, was sent to South Vietnam to give lectures on political warfare theory to our senior officers. Then after the activation of the General Political Warfare Department under the JGS, a Political Warfare School was established at Dalat in 1966 to replace the obsolescent Psywar Training Center. The school provided a two-year college
level curriculum for the training of political warfare officers and eventually became the Political Warfare College. Political warfare cadets underwent two stages of training. The first stage was military training conducted at the National Military Academy in Dalat or the Thu Duc Reserve Officer School. The second stage of training, which was conducted at the college, concentrated on specialization in political warfare theory, techniques and organization.

Thus within the space of four years, the entire training base of the RVNAF was either reorganized or expanded and modernized in order to meet the requirements of a doubling force structure, especially those of command and leadership. During this period, several events occurred which fully illustrated the status of military leadership in the RVNAF. The examples I have selected for this chapter concern the conduct of the I Corps and 1st Infantry Division commanders during the 1966 Buddhist crisis, the performance of certain province chiefs and the exploits of airborne battalion commanders.

I Corps and the 1st Infantry Division
During the 1966 Buddhist Crisis

Under President Diem's regime, the minority Roman Catholic Church unquestionably enjoyed several privileges and exclusive rights smacking of favoritism. This was one of the major causes that led to the demise of the regime in late 1963. Consequently, Buddhist influence increased, and the Buddhists eventually became a major pressure group in the nation's political life by virtue of their new political awareness. But, just like the Roman Catholics of years past, they seemed insatiable in their demands for privileges and a greater say in national affairs. And successive governments of the post-Diem era also seemed eager to give in to their every demand.

General Nguyen Khanh started the buildup of Buddhist influence by allotting public land for the erection of a "National Pagoda", which became the symbol of Buddhist predominance. Then he authorized the activation of the Buddhist chaplain corps in the RVNAF. The Buddhist chaplains, who came under the United Buddhist Church, never confined
themselves to religious matters. A few of them acted as spiritual and political leaders of the units to which they were assigned. During that time, the influence of the Vien Hoa Dao (Institute for the Propagation of Buddhism), the United Buddhist Church's executive branch, was all encompassing, reaching into all levels of the military and governmental hierarchy. For all practical purposes, it functioned not unlike a super cabinet with powers of appointing cabinet ministers and granting other favors and privileges. It came as no surprise that after every session of the Armed Forces Council, the Vien Hoa Dao immediately knew what decisions had been made. Several senior officers, to include a few members of the Armed Forces Council, felt no qualms about reporting all they knew—even military secrets—to their spiritual leaders, considering it the duty of a loyal Buddhist.

By the time the Honolulu summit conference was convened on 6 February 1966, the National Leadership Committee had ruled the country for eight months. The political turmoil of the past two years seemed to have run its course, and South Vietnam was apparently heading toward stability. At the Honolulu conference, the U.S. leaders expressed their desire that South Vietnam's political base be broadened so as to allow popular participation and to progress toward elective government and a democratic regime. At home, political parties and the Buddhists in particular viewed this patronizing attitude as a tacit agreement by the U.S. to support the National Leadership Committee. They believed that in the event of elective government, surely Mr. Thieu and Mr. Ky would come out winners. This, in their eyes, amounted to sanctioning continued military rule and making a mockery of elective government and democracy. The stage was thus set for what was about to unfold in Hue and Da Nang, the strongholds of militant Buddhists.

Apparently under the influence and perhaps the instigation of political and religious leaders in his corps area, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi, I Corps Commander and Government Delegate, who was also a member of the ruling National Leadership Committee, began to manifest his insubordination and unfriendliness toward the central government in Saigon. Rarely did he correctly implement orders received from Saigon, and he made it no secret. He even scribbled derogatory
remarks on official papers passing through his desk to accentuate his displeasure with Saigon. Fearing a breakdown in command and control that could be disastrous to the war efforts, the National Leadership Committee decided to remove General Thi on the pretext that he should have his chronic sinusitis treated abroad. He was replaced by Major General Nguyen Van Chuan, Commander of the 1st Infantry Division.

Immediately after General Thi's removal, the Buddhists began to press for a civilian government. They held meetings and mass demonstrations in Hue, Da Nang and Hoi An, vocally demanding the immediate resignation of Generals Thieu and Ky. Gradually, the Buddhist-led opposition picked up momentum and spread to Nha Trang and Saigon. Most disturbing to the central government was the fact that in Da Nang, ARVN personnel, civil servants, and dock workers also took part in anti-government demonstrations. Port activities in Da Nang were practically suspended and military activities also came to a standstill. In Saigon, demonstrators were more violent; they broke window panes of houses, upturned and set fire to U.S. jeeps. Masses of followers congregated at Buddhist temples and the National Pagoda to listen to anti-government harangues by militant bonzes.

At Hue, the situation became one of emergency when at the end of March, students took over the radio station and closed down the university. Increasingly large numbers of RVNAF personnel and civil servants joined in anti-government activities. Local military authorities and governments, meanwhile, remained passive and took no action against the rebels. In early April, Lt. Gen. Pham Xuan Chieu, Secretary General of the National Leadership Committee, was sent to Hue to negotiate a modus-vivendi with the dissidents. He was besieged by the students, who put him in a "cyclo-pousse" and paraded him, prisoner-style, through the streets. The mayor of Da Nang, Dr. Nguyen Van Man, openly sided with the dissidents while I Corps and the 1st Infantry Division declared their anti-government stance on radio.

On 4 April 1966, Prime Minister Ky held a press conference at the JGS officers' club in which he announced that he would deploy troops to the I Corps area to squelch the demonstrations and restore order and security. The dissidents in Da Nang responded by blocking all
accesses from the airport and preparing to resist. They also urged every household to display an altar in the street, hoping to deter the government from taking action. On the next morning, an airlift movement brought to Da Nang airport a governmental force composed of marines, field police, and a squadron of M-48 tanks. However, the force confined itself to the airport and was unable to act. While Major General Chuan, the I Corps Commander, was summoned to the airport to report on the situation, Colonel Dam Quang Yeu, commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, maneuvered his troops and artillery in an apparent move to encircle and threaten the airport. In his report, General Chuan seemed to be sympathetic to the dissidents' cause; it was apparent that he was not willing to act against them. General Chuan was removed and replaced by Lt. Gen. Ton That Dinh.

To muster enough force to confront the Buddhist dissidents, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, then Director General of the National Police, made an attempt to rally the VNQDD to the government's side. The VNQDD had strong support among the local population and its members, armed with government-issued old French weapons, were considered the staunchest anti-communist fighters. General Loan's efforts brought no improvement in the tense situation, however. As a result, Prime Minister Ky asked the JGS to intervene. Since General Loan was still officially handling the affair, I recommended that he be given time and military action should be delayed until everything else had failed.

When he took over as I Corps commander, General Dinh seemed entirely devoted to solving the crisis in his area of responsibility. But as time went by, he gradually made fewer and fewer contacts with the JGS and the National Leadership Committee. Finally, he stopped reporting his activities to Saigon altogether. It was apparent that General Dinh had also succumbed to Buddhist influence like his two predecessors. Summoned to Saigon for a high-level meeting, he refused to comply.

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5 Vietnam Nationalist Party, patterned after the Nationalist Chinese Kuomingtang.
The National Leadership Committee was thus faced with a dangerous and difficult situation. On the one hand, anti-government demonstrations continued to grow in fervor and extent. On the other, the corps commanders successively appointed to deal with the situation seemed to disappear from sight and one after another, openly or tacitly, took side with the dissidents and no longer responded to central control. Obviously, they had all become co-conspirators, and it was as if they had been entranced into it by some invisible force, a force so strong they could not resist. This overwhelming force was perhaps personified by the Venerable Thich Tri Quang who, as uncontested leader of the militant Buddhist faction, had been pulling the strings behind the scene for some time.

The situation became one of even greater emergency when reports indicated that the Communists were trying to win over the militant Buddhists and the dissident ARVN units to their side. There was then a real danger of losing the entire I Corps area to communist control if no action was taken in time. The JGS was well aware of this danger. If the RVNAF were to remain a cohesive military force, then no insubordination, let alone armed rebellion, could be allowed within their ranks, no matter what religious force was behind it. A swift action was decided to subdue the insubordinate I Corps Headquarters in Da Nang as the first priority. To my view, the dissidents' strength derived chiefly from the support of I Corps and once this support was removed, the political crisis would resolve itself.

The JGS plan of action centered on a surprise move to take I Corps Headquarters under control. But for this move to succeed, it was imperative that every troop deployment be kept secret. As a routine part of its unit rotation schedule, therefore, the JGS announced the replacement of one marine battalion which had been operating in Quang Ngai Province for some time by a fresh one from Saigon. This was part of a conceived scheme to use both units to take I Corps Headquarters by surprise. Orders for the unit rotation were therefore made public but the deployment of additional troops by the same movement and plans for the occupation of I Corps Headquarters were kept secret because of possible leaks to the Vien Hoa Dao.
At 0100 on 14 May 1966, an airlift utilizing both military transports and Air Vietnam commercial flights brought one marine battalion to Da Nang airport, the first contingent of a larger force deployment which was to follow during the day. When the battalion commander had assembled all of his troops on the tarmac, he still did not know what mission he was going to carry out. Only then was he briefly ordered to proceed to I Corps Headquarters and take it with the support of M-48 tanks. He was instructed to act as if he were bringing his troops to I Corps Headquarters to reinforce it on the JGS orders and not to open fire unless there was resistance. The marine and M-48 task force then moved toward I Corps Headquarters, which it entered and occupied without any incident. When General Dinh received the report that Saigon troops were installed at his headquarters, he drove to I Corps Headquarters, but seeing that its entrance was being blocked by tanks, he went to the U.S. Marine Headquarters and remained there. The uneventful occupation of I Corps Headquarters was immediately reported to Saigon. Meanwhile, the airlift continued and, eventually, another marine and two airborne battalions were brought to Da Nang. At about noontime, Premier Ky arrived in Da Nang accompanied by a group of generals and cabinet members. By this time, the reoccupation of other military installations in the city had been in full progress. Brig. Gen. Du Quoc Dong, commander of the Airborne Division, was put in command of the occupation forces, whose orders were to end disorder and anarchy. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, the governmental forces were instructed to use appeals and persuasion to obtain the surrender of dissident units. If they refused to capitulate, they should be encircled and isolated; and only when they opened fire were governmental troops allowed to fire back.

Soon most of Da Nang was restored to order and Maj. Gen. Huynh Van Cao was appointed the new I Corps commander. He seemed pleased with his new job until during a visit to Hue City, his helicopter was shot at by an ARVN serviceman's pistol while taking off. General Cao escaped uninjured but upon returning to Da Nang, he became a changed person. After charging General Loan with threatening and attempting to assassinate him, he sought refuge in the U.S. Marine Headquarters,
relinquishing his command. General Cao's sudden change of attitude seemed odd and inexplicable. Perhaps he had feared for his life or perhaps he had been persuaded into inaction by the Venerable Thich Tri Quang. In any event, as a native of Central Vietnam himself and a Roman Catholic, he probably did not want to go down into history as the man who repressed the Buddhists of Central Vietnam.

In the meantime, Da Nang was being cleared of the last but most recalcitrant group of dissidents. The Tinh Hoi Pagoda, which was their headquarters and located north of the airport, had been effectively encircled and cut off from the outside for some time. From all indications, the dissidents were running short of food and water. One of their leaders, Dr. Man, who had been the mayor of Da Nang, attempted to slip out by night but was arrested by governmental forces. Shortly after his arrest, the dissident forces inside the pagoda capitulated and turned in over 100 weapons of all types. The crisis in Da Nang was thus resolved after a long and tense week. Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the 2d Infantry Division commander, became the new I Corps commander.

From the beginning of the crisis, the government had been reluctant to use military force against the dissidents in Hue, who enjoyed the support of Brig. Gen. Phan Xuan Nhuan, commander of the 1st Infantry Division. Actions had been limited to isolating the city and restricting the supply of basic commodities for it. When the dissident problem in Da Nang had been resolved, the government secretly dispatched some emissaries to Hue to get in touch with military commanders in the area in an effort to dissuade them from giving support to the militant Buddhists. To give weight to its determination to restore order in the city, the government deployed three airborne battalions to the Dong Da Training Center under the command of Colonel Ngo Quang Truong, deputy commander of the Airborne Division. This was intended only as a show of force, because the battalions were committed to combat operations around Hue.

The crisis in Hue proved to be more serious. Being the cradle of the dissident movement, the city was teeming with radical students and
extremists. It was also where the rebellion's central headquarters was located. Thus, despite their failure in Da Nang, the dissidents continued their disruptive rampage in Hue. But here, their activities were more violent and took on an unquestionably anti-American appearance. The USIS library was ransacked and burned down by extremist students and workers. Hundreds of Buddhist monks and nuns staged a fasting sit-in demonstration in front of the U.S. Consulate building; the crisis mounted when one of the nuns immolated herself. The drama reverberated throughout the country and led to other self-immolations. Then the climax was reached when the U.S. Consulate building in Hue was set afire. To the military commanders in Hue, who had been backing the Buddhist demands, it was obvious that the struggle was getting out of hand and becoming hopeless. Disillusioned by this and other excesses, the mayor of Hue, Lt. Col. Pham Van Khoa, and the 1st Division commander, General Phan Xuan Nhuan, returned to the government side. The greatest danger of military confrontation was thus averted, and the dissident movement, now deprived of military support, was doomed to end in failure.

What followed in the days ahead consisted of police actions to clear the city from the remnants of the tattered struggle movement. Brigadier General Loan was placed in charge of this task; it did not take him very long to restore order and security. To further strengthen Hue, Colonel Ngo Quang Truong, now promoted to brigadier general, was appointed commander of the 1st Infantry Division.

The generals and officers who had been involved in the Buddhist rebellions were subsequently indicted and tried by the Armed Forces Council. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi was exiled abroad under the pretext of medical treatment while Generals Chuan, Dinh, Cao and Nhuan, were discharged from service. Eventually, Generals Chuan, Dinh and Cao turned to politics, and all became senators. The Venerable Thich Tri Quang, in the meantime, went on a protracted hunger strike after his failure. He was brought to Saigon for medical treatment at a private clinic, where he remained for a long time.

The Buddhist crisis in the I Corps area having been resolved, the National Leadership Committee set about to widen its political base.
and prepare the groundwork for elective government and a democratic
regime, the very things the Buddhists had been demanding.

Military Province Chiefs

After the successful military coup of November 1963, most of
President Diem's appointed province chiefs were either replaced or
detained for criminal investigation. But the practice of appointing
military officers as province chiefs continued under the successive
governments after Mr. Diem. Some of the old regime's province chiefs
were eventually reinstated, but they no longer enjoyed the status of
presidential representatives.

Under General Nguyen Khanh's administration, one of his
trusted aides, a Lieutenant Colonel, was appointed province chief
of Bien Hoa. A womanizer by avocation, the colonel was soon involved
in a sex scandal and sued by several abused female civil servants in
the provincial administration. As a result, he was transferred to
Phuoc Long, one of the insecure provinces sandwiched between War Zones
C and D. With his courage and initiative, the colonel succeeded in
improving security in his province and bringing about other significant
achievements. But his weakness for women soon earned him such a
notoriety that he was reassigned again, this time to Hau Nghia Province.
Hau Nghia was also infested by Communists like Phuoc Long and served as
a buffer zone shielding Saigon from enemy attacks from across the border,
which was only a short distance away. Here also, this individual proved
to be an effective province chief who was credited with improving
security in a particularly difficult situation. But here again, his
scandalously amorous adventures tarnished his good image and eventually
ended his successful career as province chief. To the judgment of
his superiors, it was much better for him to function in a purely
military capacity.

During the period of the National Leadership Committee, province
chiefs were recommended by corps commanders and appointed by the prime
minister. In general, the better province chiefs were those who had been
carefully selected on the basis of meritorious performance as military officers. Those who were recommended through personal or clannish connections usually made poor province chiefs. But no matter how they had been selected, they were all loyal to the corps commander who had recommended them.

Two exceptions to the assignment of military personnel at the province level that were dictated by politics resulted in much criticism by public opinion. The first involved the appointment of a female lawyer as mayor of Dalat. From the day she took office, she proved most uncooperative with the sector commander and the military in general. This accounted for the eventual deterioration of security in Dalat itself. The second case was the appointment of a medical doctor as province chief. Perhaps the doctor's administrative talent had justified his appointment. But his becoming province chief certainly deprived the country and the armed forces of a physician who was much needed for his professional service.

Airborne Night Raid Against a Communist Base

Leadership during the period being discussed was perhaps better at the small-unit level, especially in combat units. For one thing, most regimental and battalion commanders were not affected by the corrupting influence of politics. For another they were nurtured by fine combat traditions as exemplified by the airborne exploits I have selected to use as examples.

During the early part of 1964, intelligence collected by III Corps indicated that the Communists were using the Giong Bau area, which straddled the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border and was located 10 km north of Tan Chau, in Chau Doc Province, as a semi-permanent base to provide shelter and rest for their troops. III Corps had made a few attempts to destroy the Communist force based there but on each occasion, this force would withdraw into neutral Cambodian territory where we had no authority or right to trespass.

Some time in March 1964, the Airborne Brigade, which I commanded, received orders to conduct a night raid into the Giong Bau Base with
a force of two battalions. Since it was going to be an especially important operation, I was asked to be personally in charge. Based on the enemy's movement pattern, I developed a concept of operation designed to cut off his withdrawal route. In order to achieve this, I planned to move my two battalions by night into Cambodian territory to take blocking positions north of the base. Then an armored cavalry force would launch a frontal attack against the base from the southwest. (Map 2) If things developed as planned, the enemy force in the base would be blocked off and destroyed.

From Saigon, the two airborne battalions selected for this operation, the 1st and 8th, moved by truck to My Tho. At My Tho, they embarked on naval ships together with the armored cavalry force and artillery and proceeded upstream along the Mekong River toward Tan Chau. The entire trip took one day and one night and by 1800 of the second day, the 1st and 8th ABN Battalions had debarked in the vicinity of Thuong Phuoc. Thuong Phuoc was a border outpost manned by the Special Forces and located on the left bank of the Mekong River, about three kilometers from the border. At Thuong Phuoc, I gave final instructions to the unit commanders. The 1st ABN Battalion, taking the lead, was assigned a local guide who was provided by the outpost commander and, according to the latter, was thoroughly familiar with local terrain and extremely reliable. At 2000, the battalion moved out accompanied by the ABN Brigade tactical CP and myself. The 8th ABN Battalion followed at a short distance. The night was moonless and pitch-dark. Because of this, every man had a white piece of cloth tied to his left shoulder patch for easy recognition and to avoid straying. We moved along slowly, pressed together, and in utmost silence. As soon as we entered Cambodian territory, the lead element made sporadic contacts with the enemy, who just opened fire and broke away; this occurred about five times. Around midnight, the local guide told us that we had reached the planned blocking positions. I was suspicious because at the rate of our progress and based on the amount of time elapsed and the direction given by the compass, we were still some distance away. But after a discussion with the 1st ABN Battalion commander and the local guide, who swore he never made a mistake, I decided to give orders for the two battalions to take
blocking positions facing south. The night was cool and our force waited in silence in an open field, ready to open fire. Radio contact was maintained with the III Corps Tactical CP at Thuong Phuoc and the armored cavalry force, which had moved out some time after us in the direction of the enemy base, according to plans.

At about 0200, this armored cavalry force made a junction with us, the paratroopers, in an open field. The uneventful link-up struck me as something very odd because in pitch-darkness, we could not make out any features of the enemy base, nor was there any enemy force coming out of it. I reported this to Maj. Gen. Lam Van Phat, the III Corps commander, who ordered that the whole task force was to remain in place and move out the next morning to continue the operation southward. After a brief search around their positions, the paratroopers settled for night bivouac, posting guards and ambushes as usual.

The next morning, the airborne force was already alert and preparing to move out by 0600. The sun was not yet rising, and the early morning air was fresh and cool. For the day's operation, I had decided that the 8th Battalion would take the lead to be followed by the 1st. A short time after the 8th Battalion had moved out and while the 1st Battalion and our brigade CP was preparing to move, the enemy suddenly opened fire. Turning to the east, the direction from which the fire came, we were able to observe blazing tracers, and enemy troops, by now discernable behind parapets along a communication trench, who were firing at the paratroopers of the 8th Battalion with all types of weapons. The paratroopers were in an open field facing the enemy at a distance of merely 80 meters; they were obviously in a disadvantageous position. By now, it had become clear to me that the previous night, instead of taking positions north of the enemy base, we had installed ourselves just west of it at a distance too close for comfort. This realization came to me as a fleeting thought. I did not have time to ponder about it because a few paratroopers had already fallen and others were wounded. The paratroopers' reaction was swift and strong, but if they remained on this open ground any longer, they would certainly suffer great losses. Without losing a minute, I swept my hand
forward, ordering them to make the assault. Even my escort platoon and
an element of the 1st Battalion surged forward in unison. Simultaneously,
our APC's moved along, firing fiercely against the enemy's 57-mm re-
coilless rifles with their cal .30 and .50 machineguns. A U.S. captain
adviser to the 1st Battalion was hit in the head and fell dead. As we
made our advance toward the enemy trench, the fire volume became denser
from both sides. At a distance of 20 m, we could clearly see for our-
selves that the enemy troops were fidgeting with some 57-mm recoilless
rifles. The nearest group took aim against us and fired, but the round
did not go off, fortunately. One of our sergeants was immediately
ordered to seize the enemy weapon. He lunged forward, firing his sub-
machine gun as he went, but had to stop and crouch for a few seconds
to replace an empty case. By the time he resumed his race, however,
the enemy had fled with the recoilless rifle.

Our forces continued the assault and took the first trench, but
the enemy continued to fire back at us from another trench deeper
behind the first. At that time, I could see that the airborne element
to my left had not caught up and was still lagging behind. I turned
around and made a hand motion to urge them forward. At that precise
moment, a bullet struck me in the right shoulder, but I felt nothing.
A medic immediately ran forward as if from nowhere. He cut my shirt
around the shoulder, applied the bandage and lowered my pants to give
me an intramuscular antibiotic shot. All this had a touch of comic
while the battle was raging around me.

By now other elements of the 1st Battalion had taken the entire
first trench. Three times the enemy went on the counterattack, trying
to dislodge us from the first trench. We held fast, but the elements
to my right seemed unsure of themselves. The 1st Battalion commander
immediately moved in reinforcements behind them, and they held. From
where I was, it appeared that only an attack against the enemy's rear
could disrupt his defenses. I turned to my S-3 and tried to have him
contact the 8th Battalion for this maneuver, but he had been wounded in
one eye and in the thigh of one leg. I borrowed the 1st Battalion com-
mander's radio set and gave orders for the 8th Battalion to maneuver
against the enemy's rear. But the enemy's fire was enormous and the
8th Battalion was kept pinned down in its positions. Our efforts to take the second enemy trench and destroy his forces were also met with strong resistance. The enemy not only resisted fiercely but also constantly maneuvered for counterattacks. Our 155-mm artillery battery at Tan Chau, 10 km away, was unable to fire in support because the enemy was too close.

The outcome of the battle was still undecided when Maj. Gen. Lam Van Phat, the III Corps Commander, brought in a number of light tanks as reinforcements. The enemy soon realized that he was running the risk of being encircled. As a result, he immediately broke contact and withdrew inside Cambodia. We received orders not to make any pursuit in daylight to avoid Prince Sihanouk's vocal protests. I looked at my watch and realized that the battle had lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes. By now, U.S. helicopters had arrived to pick up our wounded, and I was the last to be evacuated.

The operation continued southward after this under the command of my chief of staff. It ended with 60 enemy killed and a number of enemy weapons captured. Our force suffered 9 killed and 15 wounded, to include myself. Those paratroopers who had proved meritorious during the battle were appropriately rewarded by the III Corps commander. I was recuperating at the Cong Hoa Hospital when Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh made a surprise visit during which he pinned on me the two-star major general rank insignia. Looking back on my career, this was perhaps the greatest honor I ever received.

**Observations**

The years from early 1964 to late 1967 can be summarily divided into two distinct periods. The first period, which lasted until mid-1965, was truly one of the bleakest, marked by political instability and military defeats. Within the short span of one year and a half, the country underwent three successive coups and counter-coups and no government lasted even one year. The Military Revolutionary Council under General Minh was ousted after just three months in power. The next administration under General Nguyen Khanh lasted only nine months,
and the civilian government that took over from him fared no better. Militarily, South Vietnam went from one defeat to another, and the situation so deteriorated that the U.S. was compelled to participate in the ground war.

During that period of time, military leadership in the RVNAF was influenced by several factors.

First, the removal of President Diem from power gave the Communists a valuable chance of winning militarily in South Vietnam. As a result, they began to increase the infiltration of men and weapons into the South to take advantage of a situation deemed favorable for their takeover.

Next, political turmoil and the frequent turnover of governments in Saigon exerted a profound impact on the morale of troops and utterly confused the population. A number of military commanders who had become addicted to power since the original coup, realized that the shortest way to promotion and important positions was through conspiracy and coups. Therefore they spent most of their time plotting intrigues, switching allegiances, and maneuvering for political prominence.

The RVNAF suffered from all this neglect and irresponsibility. Their command and control became loose and nonexistent at times because each commander cared only for his own precarious future. Military hierarchy was upset by uncontrolled promotions, which were handed out to buy allegiance, especially as far as generals and colonels were concerned. General Nguyen Khanh, for example, promoted many generals and colonels to win their support for his Vung Tau Charter. Finally, those who had served under President Diem's administration became passive and uncooperative.

The second period began when the National Leadership Committee took power; it lasted for nearly two and a half years. This was a period during which the JGS was able to play its role correctly and achieve substantial progress in personnel administration, force structure expansion and unit training. Most importantly, it took a special interest in command and leadership at the unit level. At the same time, the JGS endeavored to solve the problems occasioned by manpower shortages and desertion. This was also a period deemed entirely favorable for the
improvement and consolidation of the RVNAF because with the participa-
tion of U.S. and FWMA forces, our forces were responsible primarily
for the support of pacification and rural development.

The National Leadership Committee, however, had certain ways of
operating which affected the military command and control system and
impeded to a certain extent the many achievements that would have
otherwise been more spectacular. One may say that under more favorable
circumstances, the RVNAF would have been able to achieve progress more
rapidly. As a team, the National Leadership Committee functioned on
the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility."
As a result, important affairs of the nation, be they political, mili-
tary, or administrative, were all subjected to the process of discussion,
debate and decision-making during monthly sessions. For emergencies
that needed immediate attention and action, the committee would meet
in special sessions. The process of decision-making, however, remained
the same. During these sessions, every committee member took part in
the debates, suggesting ideas or policies, and voted for decisions. If
a decision or a policy pertained to the area of responsibility of any
one member, that member was required to carry it out. In this way,
problems were all solved on the basis of mutual understanding and general
consent.

This supposedly democratic way of ruling the country, however,
inhibited command and control of the armed forces. As members of the
NLC, for example, the four corps commanders, although military subor-
dinates, were the political equals of the chairman of the JGS and the
Minister of Defense, who were but two more NLC members. A corps
commander also served as government delegate in his own corps areas,
a position which gave him ample authority in the appointment or removal
of province chiefs. As a consequence, corps commanders enjoyed nearly
absolute freedom of action and immense powers in their areas of respon-
sibility, which they tended to consider their own fiefdoms. This was
the major cause for warlordism and, when a corps commander joined for-
tes with a dissident political party or religious group—as was the
case with the I Corps commander in the 1966 Buddhist crisis—insurbor-
dination and rebellion.
Viewed under the special circumstances of the aftermath of the 1963 military coup in which the Buddhists came out victors, the 1966 Buddhist crisis can be considered the inevitable result of religious supremacy and interference in affairs of state. The militant Buddhists of Hue, who had initiated the downfall of President Diem, rightfully considered themselves the guardians of a regime they had helped create. Their political influence therefore grew and expanded to the point of dominating South Vietnam's political life. It was a fact to reckon with when they decided to challenge the NLC, whose leaders, Thieu and Ky, ignored their dictates. The confrontation turned into a real crisis when the NLC leaders removed General Thi, a strongman the militant Buddhists used to advance their cause and influence. Challenging this predominant influence amounted to political suicide because it involved actions which could be interpreted as repressive measures. Since repression had led to the demise of President Diem, who would even dare, when faced with Buddhist demonstrations, to take forceful action? That explained the unwillingness of the "recalcitrant" commanders who succeeded General Thi in I Corps to carry out orders from the NLC, which they believed had no chance against the Buddhists. Besides, by bending under this dominant political force, perhaps these commanders had hoped to come out heroes and possibly become future national leaders in the event the NLC failed. It was extremism, however, that weakened the militant Buddhists' cause and led to their diminishing influence after the crisis was resolved.

The powers enjoyed by a corps commander during this period also gave rise to other forms of abuse which inevitably led to corruption if the commander sought to enrich himself. Corruption was indeed much talked about during this period, especially as far as IV Corps was concerned. It seemed as though the corrupting effect of power politics has incapacitated the RVNAF leadership at the very level where it was required to be strongest. In view of the enemy's stepped up activities, it came as no surprise where the RVNAF went from one setback to another and did not recover until politics was finally removed from their ranks.
Despite the political turmoil which affected higher levels of the RVNAF hierarchy, performance at the regimental and battalion levels continued to be good and seemed unaffected by events. The performance of airborne battalions during this period provided a striking example of effective military leadership during combat action. This example seemed to emphasize that to be effective, military leadership should stay away from politics.

As a combat arm of the ARVN, perhaps the Airborne Brigade had the most to show for its combat records and gallantry. The 1st, 3d and 5th Battalions, which were the first-activated units of the brigade, were also the ones that accomplished the most combat exploits. The 1st Battalion in particular had been cited nine times. Major Ngo Quang Truong, the 5th Battalion commander, was among our best, who excelled not only because of his courage and combat prowess but also because he was a born leader of men. During the heliborne operation against the enemy Hat Dich War Zone in Phuoc Tuy Province, for example, he was always seen with the first-line elements, leading them into assaults. On the merit of his combat record, Major Truong was destined to have a brilliant military career and eventually became one of our foremost field commanders. His command and leadership ability will be a subject of discussion in the next chapter.

What then set the airborne battalions apart from other infantry battalions and explained their superior combat effectiveness? There were several reasons, but it appeared that tradition and pride were the major ones. The paratroopers had always functioned as a most closely-knit combat arm endowed with the keenest sense of duty and leadership. Their basic tenet was: "There is no mission that cannot be accomplished; no matter how difficult or how dangerous, every assigned mission must be completed." The tradition of fine leadership in airborne units was also fostered by the belief that "if your predecessors could do it, you could do it, too." As a result, every unit commander endeavored to set examples for his officers; and men, especially the newcomers, endeavored to live up to the reputation of the airborne corps as an elite combat arm.
This reputation was symbolized by the red beret that every paratrooper wore with evident pride. A U.S. adviser once recommended that the red beret should be discarded to cut down on expenditures. He was strongly advised not to tamper with that sacred symbol because its removal would seriously affect the paratroopers' combat spirit. The ARVN paratroopers fought for an ideal, just like their infantry counterparts or any counterparts in advanced countries. But first and foremost, they fought and sacrificed themselves for the red beret, which symbolized their pride and tradition. I remember what I usually told the officers when they first reported for duty in the Airborne Brigade. I told them that first they had to maintain the paratroopers' tradition and when going into combat for the first time, they had to stand upright under fire to give commands to their troops, because this was the moment when the troops appraised their leaders. I also told them that if they behaved cowardly or proved unworthy as combat leaders, they had better leave the brigade, because there was no place for an airborne officer who had lost his prestige as a leader. All of these officers heeded my advice, and several of them gave their lives in their first combat experience. I had felt some remorse since then because in some way I was responsible for their early deaths. I also came to realize that there were other ways to maintain the airborne corps' tradition beside sheer physical courage, and it was better to leave it up to them and let them find their own way.

Other ingredients that contributed to the paratroopers' superior combat ability were training, esprit de corps and good care. The training process that every paratrooper had to go through was indeed an arduous one that built up audacity, endurance and self-assurance in combat. The paratroopers also enjoyed a collective life that kept them bound together in a strong esprit de corps. For one thing, airborne units received the best care and treatment available. As a unit of the general reserves, each battalion was assigned a medical doctor who always accompanied it in combat. This was a privilege that no other infantry battalion enjoyed, except the marines. After a combat operation, each battalion returned to its rear base for a rest and refitting period, and when the time came for another operation, it was fresh
and ready. At their rear base, the paratroopers enjoyed a comfortable life. Married men were allotted decent housing, and their dependents were given good care by the unit.

In general, except for a proud tradition, military leadership in airborne units did not differ from other combat organizations. The same principles and personal traits were required throughout the RVNAF to produce the caliber of leaderships required.