A VIEW OF THE VC:
ELEMENTS OF COHESION IN THE
ENEMY CAMP IN 1966-1967

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"The instructor taught us that the Revolution is not a short-term business."

A Civilian Rallier from Dinh Tuong Province, August 22, 1965

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FOREWORD

This report is one of a series of Rand studies that examine the organization, operations, motivation, and morale of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces that fought in South Vietnam.

Between August 1964 and December 1968 The Rand Corporation conducted approximately 2400 interviews with Vietnamese who were familiar with the activities of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army. Reports of those interviews, totaling some 62,000 pages, were reviewed and released to the public in June 1972. They can be obtained from the National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce.

The release of the interviews has made possible the declassification and release of some of the classified Rand reports derived from them. To remain consistent with the policy followed in reviewing the interviews, information that could lead to the identification of individual interviewees was deleted, along with a few specific references to sources that remain classified. In most cases, it was necessary to drop or to change only a word or two, and in some cases, a footnote. The meaning of a sentence or the intent of the author was not altered.

The reports contain information and interpretations relating to issues that are still being debated. It should be pointed out that there was substantive disagreement among the Rand researchers involved in Vietnam research at the time, and contrary points of view with totally different implications for U.S. operations can be found in the reports. This internal debate mirrored the debate that was then current throughout the nation.

A complete list of the Rand reports that have been released to the public is contained in the bibliography that follows.

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Bibliography of Related Rand Reports


These reports can be obtained from The Rand Corporation.

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This Memorandum is one of a series on Viet Cong motivation and morale undertaken by The RAND Corporation for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) and the Advanced Research Projects Agency.

It tries to assess elements of cohesion in the enemy forces that have made it possible so far for the enemy to retain effective control over his actions and his organization. For the purpose of this analysis, interviews collected primarily during 1966 and the first half of 1967 have been exploited.
SUMMARY

The following study shows that the continuing cohesion and momentum which the VC have been able to retain in the face of protracted fighting and the great material superiority of their opponent seem to be based on a variety of factors that not only have sustained them so far, but may well continue to do so for an indefinite period of time. Among these factors are their (1) sense of mission; (2) ability to avoid, for individual soldiers or units, excessive frequency or duration of combat; (3) trust in their leaders; (4) ways of accommodating each other in their trying situations; (5) adequate relationship with the villagers; and (6) if not expectation of victory, at least nonexpectation of defeat.

The study also shows, almost throughout, that the enemy tends to have no doubt about the righteousness of his mission: Northerners in no way seem to regard their presence in the South as an aggression since they consider both Vietnams to be "one country of brothers"; and both Northerners and Southerners seem to feel that their struggle against "the Americans" is not merely justified, but a national necessity. The study shows that the more an aggressor's or infiltrator's forces are compelled to rely increasingly on defense, the more he may come to feel that he is fighting for the defense of his own country and his life in it -- to which he may not only feel fundamentally entitled, but even deeply obligated.

The study shows, further, that the various elements of strength and cohesion in the enemy camp are all tending to reinforce each other so as to make a collapse of the
VC as a whole or of individual VC units, short of physical annihilation, more unlikely than not in response to present strategies. Somehow, the pressures under which the enemy operates and the weaknesses that afflict him, such as manpower and logistical problems, have not -- and perhaps cannot under circumstances now prevailing -- eroded those elements of strength and cohesion that have been identified in this report.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In writing this study the author has greatly profited from the many critical remarks and encouraging suggestions presented to him by Samuel Cochran, Frank Denton, Alex George, Melvin Gurtov, as well as Arnold Horelick, S. T. Hosmer, Irving Janis, Nathan Leites, David Mozingo, Guy Pauker, Hans Speier, and Ralph Strauch. As the reader can see, the list of those who read the manuscript and commented on it is long, and the author is painfully aware that he has not been able to do full justice to all the efforts devoted by these colleagues to his paper, even though he tried. The final product, of course, is his own responsibility in every respect.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The following study tries to uncover some of the sources of the cohesion and fighting effectiveness the VC have been able to muster in the face of greatly superior military force. The study is part of RAND's Motivation and Morale Project.

Since 1964, this project has produced a series of interviews with VC prisoners and defectors by means of specially designed questionnaires that probed into a great variety of physical and psychological factors in the enemy forces. Then, toward the end of 1966, it was decided to focus some part of the Motivation and Morale study, and, therefore, some of the interrogation effort, more specifically on elements of cohesion and disintegration in the VC forces. This new effort was to be based on what was considered a cluster of indicators of cohesion and disintegration in the VC forces. Among such indicators were the VC soldier's attitude toward the U.S./GVN, his combat exposure, his expectations with regard to the course of the war, and his relationship to the villagers and to his leaders.

This particular study deals only with elements of cohesion. There were two reasons for undertaking such a study at this time. One was that the Motivation and Morale study as a whole had -- understandably -- been gravitating from the beginning toward enemy vulnerabilities; it was therefore felt that a specific look at enemy strengths was

*The term "VC" in this study refers to the enemy as a whole, including his NVA component.
now needed in order to fill a gap and establish a better balance in the program. The other reason was that a look at enemy strengths seemed to brook no further delay in view of the enemy's remarkable tenacity in the face of many physical and psychological adversities -- a view that has been strongly confirmed by the considerable combat strength he has displayed in 1967.

The reader should at all times keep in mind that past studies have already given us insights into enemy weaknesses and elements of disintegration. There are manpower shortages in many VC units, losses of cadre not made up by replacements of equal quality, dissatisfactions on the part of the soldiers with their frequent moving and desolate existence in the jungle, VC disappointments with villagers' attitudes, ordnance problems, feelings of war weariness and hopelessness or fear in the face of our vastly superior fire power, food shortages, and so on. In fact, of the cracks in the VC wall -- with which this study deliberately does not deal -- there are so many unmistakable examples that, in the somewhat bizarre phrase used regularly in G-2 reports toward the end of World War II about the Wehrmacht, the enemy should be "capable of collapse and surrender."

But as yet he has neither collapsed nor surrendered, and this study addresses itself to the question: Why not?

The underlying interviews, of which the analyst eventually selected 35 for direct quotation in his study,
consist in the main of 219 RAND interrogations conducted between early 1966 and August 1967.* These interviews, averaging in length perhaps 75 pages each, served as data base.

The passages from interviews actually quoted in the text were deliberately selected because the quotes seemed to illustrate most strikingly the indicators of cohesion with which the study is concerned. In view of the fact that the quotes were especially selected for their telling nature, they cannot by definition be fully representative. Put differently, it can be said that if every VC felt the way the quoted respondents expressed themselves on every subject under discussion here, the VC forces as a whole would be a good deal stronger and more cohesive than they actually are. But this study does not aim at providing a balance sheet of the VC; it merely tries to identify elements of strengths that have been operative in the past.

The study -- even beyond its one-sided endeavor to look at elements of strengths only -- is not all-inclusive. It has paid least attention to those elements of strengths which are already well known. VC surveillance and organization, and VC practices of self-criticism and the three-man cell, all of which have long been recognized as contributing substantially to VC cohesion, have

*Appendix B contains background data on the 35 subjects quoted in this study.
received practically no attention. Instead, the study has tried to discern and circumscribe other elements, some of which are known to some extent already, but which so far do not seem to have been isolated and specifically perceived as elements of cohesion. Also, the study has not particularly focused on nationalism (or the quest for "national independence"), which, in a way, pervades practically all VC concerns and is, it seems, one of the main-springs of VC momentum. Subsequent studies may probe this element more specifically.

The study has taken all the enemy's forces into consideration -- NVA, Main Forces, Local Forces, village guerrillas -- but has concentrated on the core of his armed strength, i.e., the Main Forces, including the NVA. Quotes from Local Forces or village guerrillas serve mainly to round out the picture. No efforts were made to refine the results by distinguishing among respondents with respect to their status as volunteers or draftees, their length of combat exposure, or their rank as privates or officers. Therefore, no comparative conclusions can be drawn from this study as to which forces or units are more cohesive than others, though, of course, there are undoubtedly such differences.

Owing to the focus the study set for itself, there are among those ex-VC soldiers interviewed a fairly large number of "hard-core" types who give the interviewer the VC "line" on a number of topics. There are also more cadres than fighters, more prisoners than ralliers. But this does not mean that the study is merely an exercise in summarizing enemy propaganda. To begin with, propaganda is, after all, a source, as well as evidence, of strength
or cohesion or loyalty. Besides, the topical elements included recurred sufficiently often in one form or another in the bulk of the interviews to reflect more than just enemy propaganda, which, moreover, is always only part fiction and part fact. Finally, an -- admittedly rough -- available computer run on 171 (out of the 219) interviews used here was included which supported some of the findings contained in this study. (See report in Appendix A.)

Because of the nature of the data, this study did not concern itself with trends, except that the analyst can state, in very general terms, that from what he has read in the interviews over the past years, the identified elements of strengths do not seem to be in substantial decline. Nor has the study dealt with the intensity of certain manifestations, except indirectly, in that degrees of intensity are implicit in the terminology used by the respondents.

Of course, what any study on enemy cohesion in times of war ultimately wants to know, or at least would like to shed some light on, is whether the enemy can continue to persist; whether he is approaching a breaking point and, if so, at what rate and under what conditions; and what can be done to expedite his arrival there. To begin with, just how would one best define the term "breaking point"? In this analyst's view, it would be that point at which the enemy could no longer cohere or marshall enough momentum to give battle, though he would still retain some of his physical means of action. It would be a configuration of circumstances in which the enemy would have no capacity for sustained defensive action, one in which the enemy commanders could barely hold their forces together in
organized units, and large-scale individual and group desertions would occur. At the breaking point the enemy would give up rather than be annihilated. It would mark the point when his capabilities, not his resources, would be exhausted.

Theoretically, such a breaking point might be reached by the enemy in two different ways: by a rational decision on the part of his top leadership to call off the entire venture, or by a disintegration of his fighting force -- either in individual units or all along the line -- against his decision. The two can of course interact to some extent. That is, the leaders may decide to call a halt because there are signs of disintegration in their forces, which, in their view, are not likely to abate. But still, the two avenues toward such a point are distinguishable from each other. Hitler, for example, never gave up until all his capabilities were exhausted; the Belgians, in the same war, gave up via a leadership decision based on rational thinking.

With regard to the VC, this study has nothing to say about the possibility of a breaking point being reached from the top, i.e., by enemy decision makers, whoever they are. This study looks only at the bottom of the pyramid and presents, in the following, some evidence as to why that point has not so far been reached by the VC forces in the field.

With regard to the design of the entire research effort into enemy cohesion and disintegration, from the designing of questionnaires to the analyzing of results, many cues have been taken from the work done by Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz on the Wehrmacht, and even more from
Alexander L. George's study of the Chinese Army in Korea.*

In fact, the indicators of cohesion and disintegration used in designing the questionnaire on that subject are to a considerable extent based on similar elements that became apparent in George's study of the Chinese forces. A look at the Chinese model, as it emerges from George's work, permits, among other things, an evaluation as to whether the VC, who, as we know, tried (and presumably still try) to emulate the Chinese, were successful in actually shaping their armed forces in the Chinese image. It also provides an overview of the actual symptoms and manifestations of disintegration when it finally set in, by which we may be able to spot parallel developments or -- if that should turn out to be the case -- their absence. This particular study and the data on which it is based are not sufficiently far advanced to superimpose what knowledge of the VC we have on the Chinese model -- or on a more general phenomenology of army cohesion and disintegration -- and then simply read off precisely where the VC now stand with regard to cohesion and disintegration, or where they are going and at what rate. But the overview of the VC forces presented here is constructed with the Chinese model -- and the more general model of cohesion and disintegration in other armies and in other wars -- in mind at all times.

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II. THE FISH AND ITS WATER RESERVES

Even though Mao's famous quotation about the fish and the water may no longer fully apply to the situation in Vietnam, his comparison continues to reflect the vital needs of the "fish": For the VC, their relationship with the people in the countryside is of great importance, both physically and psychologically. To some extent, their food, shelter, security, intelligence, mobility, and sense of mission depend on that relationship.

In the early days of the insurgency, the villagers were apparently much attracted to the VC. "When they first came to the village," reports a hamlet guerrilla who defected in mid-1966, "they made propaganda. They said beautiful things. They told the villagers of the liberation of the South and the unification of the country. What they told us appealed to us. Later," said the guerrilla, "some villagers became 'distrustful' of the VC, when 'nothing the VC had promised actually materialized.'" Still, according to the respondent, "the villagers mostly [continued to] like the Front cadres because the latter knew how to appeal to the people's emotions. They talked about beautiful things, and what they said was so pleasant to hear." (1) This deposition, it should be noted, was

* Mao speaks of guerrillas existing in the enemy's rear who "cannot alienate the people as long as they are disciplined." (On Guerrilla Warfare, translated by S. Griffith, New York, 1956). Mao did not foresee -- at least not in this passage -- that in a protracted war guerrilla forces may be forced, whether they are disciplined or not, to resort to measures such as heavy taxation, forced draft and so on that strain their relationship with the people.
made at a time when people in the hamlets might have had ample opportunity to become sufficiently disillusioned no longer to "like the Front cadres." Yet, at least according to this source, they continued to do so, which may indicate, among other things, that even a certain amount of "distrust" or disappointment does not automatically produce dislike or actual hostility.

A captured Main Force lieutenant, a regroupee from the North, put his claim to the people's devotion in sterner terms: "We are the people's sons. We and the people are one. We and the people are like body and shadow. Therefore we get cover and protection from the people. They do not drive us away when we come to them. Instead, they give us food and shelter. Our relationship with the people is very close, now as in the Resistance days." (2)

To attain and maintain satisfactory working relations with the village population, the VC not only resort to propaganda, but exhort their men to treat the people well. An NVA corporal, when asked what he had been told his behavior toward the people must be, couched his reply in Mao's dictum: "Towards the people: no stealing, not even a needle or a piece of thread." (3) As a result, according to some of the interviews, harmony reigns between the VC and the people, despite the pressures the war is exerting on both. * To the question as to whether

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*It is this analyst's impression that rejection of VC troops by villagers, where it occurs, is of a different nature from rejection of GVN soldiers. Negative villagers' feeling to the VC seems to be the result of actual damage incurred by bombings in response to VC presence, taxation,
the villagers were happy to "have you camp in their homes," one captive, a corporal, replied: "The people in Nhan Thinh [Binh Dinh Province] were very happy to have us stay in their homes; some even lent us their cooking implements, others cooked for us. The people liked the soldiers very much and treated them like their relatives." (4) Or another prisoner, a platoon leader: "In my area of operations [the Highlands] the villagers were friendly toward us. We were given food. From time to time, the villagers gave us money, too." (5) And a Local Force private had this to say: "My company never had to buy rice. All the rice we ate was the people's contribution to the Front.... Some people refused us salt, but they were very few." (6)

One guerrilla speaks of a different experience: "Once we were short of rice when our supplies were delayed, and so we went to several villagers to ask for a few cans of rice, but each of them refused." However, perhaps significantly, the soldier had no hard feelings: "I think the villagers were right. They were poor themselves. How could we expect to receive help from

draft, and, occasionally, disappointment with a lack of VC victory, whereas negative villager feeling toward the GVN seems to be a more basic hostility resulting from GVN aims and behavior. In fact, it is one of the tentative findings of this paper that negative feelings toward the VC, where they occur, differ substantially from those toward the GVN. Villagers apparently reject the VC "in sorrow rather than in anger," but reject the GVN, where they reject it, "in anger rather than in sorrow." It is clear that, should this hypothesis stand up to further analysis, it would have some bearing on any struggle "for the hearts and minds" of the villagers.
them?" (7) The answer seems to indicate that the VC -- if they so elect -- can be as forebearing with the villagers as the villagers can be with them, a forebearance likely to bring flexibility into the relationship.

A guerrilla platoon leader made this estimate: "About one-third of the people liked us because they were VC sympathizers. The rest of the people didn't." In terms of percentages, a third may not be very much. But, considering the fact that in revolutionary situations the activists, though generally in the minority, are the ones that count, even this figure -- if accurate -- would be quite impressive. As to "the rest" the VC continued the struggle for their "hearts and minds," VC-style: "The people had to put up with us. They were told to help the Revolution. They had no choice. If they had shown dissatisfaction, they would have been sent to re-education sessions. They had to please us in order to avoid trouble." (8) One respondent stated that the villagers supported the VC not just with food and shelter, but also with care of the disabled: "The sick and severely wounded were entrusted to the care of the villagers' families. The amputees, too, were sent to the various villages where families belonging to various Front organizations took care of them." (5)

Were the villagers not worried about the VC presence? According to a captured platoon leader, "The villagers seemed to be afraid that our presence might cause the village to be bombarded by GVN artillery or aircraft, but they never asked us to leave." (5) The same topic received the following treatment in a captured VC
People's attitudes: no longer afraid of troops in the area. The people also stopped reporting our arrival to the enemy. Instead, when our troops come to the village, the people buy rice for them, cook for them and protect them." (36) One captured fighter, when asked how the villagers had reacted to his unit being stationed in their village, presented this idyllic picture: "The people were very happy about it, because life in the village became much gayer. At night we gathered all the children and sang. It was fun and the villagers liked it a lot." But were they not scared their village might be bombed? "A number of villagers were afraid of this, but these people were in the minority. Most villagers said the Americans bombed anywhere and any way, and didn't bomb troops only. So, they said, if the Americans wanted to bomb the village they would do so whether the troops were there or not." (9)

Still, the soldier's unit eventually moved into the forest. Why did they move? "Because we would have more security living in the forest than in the village. If we were detected and bombed, the people would be caught in the bombing." (9) This response suggests that the VC were in some instances not merely concerned with their own security, but also with the lives of the villagers. Whether this was due to their chivalrous concern, or whether the statement was merely propagandistic embroidery around a military necessity, the cadre reported it as part of the VC's motivation to take the additional hardships of jungle life upon themselves in order to save
the population unnecessary exposure to bombs. The people might well have been grateful for such consideration.

Some villagers, in turn, apparently responded on occasion in ways that would reflect true sympathy and encouragement for the VC: "I myself have seen dead revolutionaries receive honors from the people. I participated in the attack on Tanh Binh Thay Post, near My Tho. It wasn't a successful attack, and four bodies of my comrades were left behind. The local people around there took up a collection, bought four nice coffins and then asked the authorities in the post for permission to let them bury the four bodies. I saw the four graves side by side in the cemetery. This was done by people who were not related to the dead fighters. The people mourned their deaths." (10) The respondent in this case is an assistant company commander.

In a rallier's account of a dramatic moment of high excitement, the villagers seemed to have actively and spontaneously sided with the VC: "At Son Chau I witnessed a would-be deserter get caught ... he was one of four soldiers coming into the village. Suddenly he began running toward the GVN military post at Hui Tron.... The three other soldiers opened fire, and the people started running after the man with machetes and sticks. They caught up with him, and he had to surrender...." (11) Another soldier, a captured fighter, reports a general reaction -- shared by himself -- that attests to the hold of VC propaganda on villagers in certain instances of stress and confusion: "Once every two months the ARVN came [to a village formerly under GVN control] and all
the village youth would run away." -- "Why were the villagers so afraid of the GVN?" -- "I don't understand why, but after listening to VC propaganda I got frightened too. I had lived happily under the GVN; I had been able to go to school there, and never heard my mother complain about high taxes there. Yet, the VC had a way of scaring the wits out of us." (9)

Few, if any, of the villagers are reported in the interviews as having behaved in an actively hostile fashion to the VC soldiers, let alone voiced hostility to the VC cause. This finding concerning the villagers' attitudes and actions is thrown into clearer relief if viewed in the light of the striking absence, in the interviews, of evidence that the villagers liked the GVN or favored their victory, or actually helped them. While some allegiance for the GVN in GVN areas is reported by some respondents, none report hidden sympathies for the GVN in VC-controlled hamlets. Thus, as suggested by the foregoing, what began as a romance between the villagers and the VC may have lost some of its luster; but there is some evidence that instead of evanescing, the romance has rather turned into a workable marriage of convenience, and there is nothing to indicate that the two hard-pressed partners are considering an early divorce. The analogy, of course, limps, as the VC would not seek a divorce from the people in any event. But -- from the interviews examined here -- the people do not give any evidence of seeking it either, least of all because of blandishment from the Saigon suitor. This is of crucial importance for the VC who, in the words of one prisoner, "couldn't exist for a month without the people's help." Thus, continued and apparently
often voluntary support by the villagers emerges as one of the elements of support which the VC need to maintain cohesion and give battle.
III. THE EVIL AMERICANS

If strong hostility to the enemy and all he stands for is one token of an army's cohesion and resolve, the VC leadership can be pleased with the attitudes prevailing in its forces on this score. Even though a captive or rallier who is careful and pragmatic -- and many Vietnamese apparently are -- might think twice before telling his interrogator that he hated Americans, the underlying materials collected during 1966-1967 contain so many examples of strong VC hostility to Americans on so many different grounds that it is hard to select the most telling examples.

Some respondents, of course, attribute imperialist designs to the Americans. One captured Main Force corporal, when asked what his cadres had said about the Americans, reported: "The cadres explained that the Americans do not think the GVN capable of defeating the Front.... The Americans, they said, had come to help the GVN, but in reality they had come to take over South Vietnam. The cadres also said that ... after having taken over the South, the Americans would take over North Vietnam, and then attack Red China." Did the men in his unit believe what they were told? "Yes, everyone of us did." (4) The corporal added: "Thus to liberate the South would also serve the purpose of defending the North." It must be conceded to the VC that this is a rather clever -- and in this instance apparently effective -- line to take with an NVA soldier (as this man was); should the NVA soldiers become weary of "liberating the South," they are to remember that they are not fighting in the
South for altruistic reasons only, but to protect their homeland which the Americans would otherwise take. *

The same corporal was even willing to give American soldiers the benefit of the doubt: "If asked, any American G.I. would say in all sincerity that he believes the Americans have indeed come to help the GVN." But the respondent said he knew better: "I personally think this war has cost the United States a lot, and if the United States should win, South Vietnam would have nothing to pay them back. When that time comes, whether anybody wants it or not, the United States will have to rule over South Vietnam. The Americans are good people, but they will be forced to do this to compensate themselves for what they have put into Vietnam. In short, South Vietnam would be taken over sooner or later." (4)

The same doctrinal view, to the effect that there is a split between the Americans and their leaders, recurred in this sergeant's statement: "The cadre said that only the American imperialists were bad men, and that the American people were very nice. Some Americans told their sons not to go to Vietnam to shoot at the Vietnamese people. They said some elements in the United States had staged antiwar demonstrations." (12) This interviewee added a note which appears frequently also in other interviews: "The cadres said the war could only end if

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*Of course, NVA soldiers tend to insist on the "one country" view with regard to South and North Vietnam, so that by definition they cannot consider themselves aggressors while fighting in the South. Thus, their minds may be regarded as free of the corroding thought that their mission is not legitimate.
On the subject of imperialist intent, a captured Main Force private presented this rather original version: "The cadres said the American imperialists were kind to the GVN now... so that when the South was pacified, they could start exploiting the people in the South just as in the old times when the emperors forced the people to dive for pearls, or hunt for elephant tusks in the forests...." (13) The respondent gave no indication whether he believed this.

In most instances the response to the Americans is less abstract. One Labor Youth Group member made this entry in his diary: "... in my first engagement I received two wounds on my body that left, I think, permanent marks. Every time I looked at them, my hatred against the imperialists and capitalists, particularly the Americans, welled up." (40) Almost equally personal and direct is an account by a captured corporal: "The cadre said to us: '... as you can see, the Americans never let our people live in peace. They are bombing the North.... Peace loving people, children and students are killed in the North. Market places are attacked. What do you think, comrades? Should we let them do all that?!'" And the corporal who reported this speech by his cadre, added in conclusion: "Frankly, we hated the Americans." (14)

A rallier presented a racial version, which he seemed to have accepted: "I was told the Americans hired the GVN to wage war on their behalf. This would kill many Vietnamese young people and leave the Americans free to take all the Vietnamese girls. I was told it was
our duty to help the Front save our race." (15) A captured regroupee lieutenant, when asked what he had been told about the American forces while in the Front, simply stated: "I heard that the Americans had come to kill the Vietnamese people" (16) -- an explanation he apparently believed. Similarly negative was this reported response of the villagers: "They said that [because of the spraying] they could not live with the invaders." When asked what the villagers would have meant by the "invaders," the respondent (a captured fighter) replied: "By the invaders they meant the Americans." (17) A hamlet guerrilla reported the negative attitude of the population in the following interchange: "Did the people in your village want the Americans to leave the South?" -- "Will any harm come to me if I tell you the truth?" -- "No." -- "Well, I can tell you this: the majority of the people in the village would prefer the Americans to leave the South." (1)

A more drastic response by villagers to the Americans was reported by this assistant company commander in the Local Forces, who added that he shared that response: "They [the people] hated the Americans. This is the truth. Take me, for example. I consider the Americans my enemy. The people blamed the Americans for the attacks [on the villages].... The Vietnamese couldn't have done that. People of the same race, the same country, wouldn't kill each other. Only the Americans would kill so senselessly...." (10) The speaker, a Party member in addition to his rank in the Local Forces, was here expressing a view contrary to demonstrable reality: after all, Vietnamese have found it quite easy in this
war to kill each other. But he sounds convinced and, to his men, probably quite convincing.

Some respondents give evasive answers when asked, "What do you think about the Americans?": "I only see that the people are suffering hardships. Now, I only want to know what can be done to make the Americans go back to their country so that both (Vietnamese) governments can come to an agreement to relieve the people's suffering." Others express perplexity as to the American presence and purpose; such as this fighter, a captive: "Certainly, to come here like this, they (the Americans) must want something, but what it is I cannot understand." (17) Or: "From the newspapers I know that America is a rich country. It helps the GVN fight the Communist government. I don't know what America wants in Vietnam." (18) A more definite view of the American presence was expressed by a Local Force platoon leader: "It is my opinion that if the Americans hadn't come to South Vietnam, the differences between North and South Vietnam could have been settled by different and more peaceful means."* And the same captive, also a Party member and guerrilla instructor, added: "The Nationalist government claims that the North wanted to take over the South, and that it therefore needed assistance from the Americans. This was the cause of all the fighting." (19)

*Future papers on the VC will try to establish how widespread this particular view is. It seems to be rapidly spreading in the VC.
Some men -- in this case a fighter -- have no opinions of their own about the American presence: "I have no particular thoughts about the Americans. We were told the Americans were aggressors, and we just took them as such." (2) A captured senior lieutenant, on the other hand, regarded Americans as inherently evil: "Why do you think the Americans are bombing North Vietnam?" -- "You should know that better than I do." -- "I want your opinion." -- "The Americans are a warlike people. They bomb North Vietnam because they like to." (18)

But, perhaps surprisingly, some VC respondents who showed strong hostility to the Americans and deplored their presence in Vietnam -- aside from seeing in that presence the "cause for all the fighting" and the obstacle to peace -- did not seem to consider the American presence a reason to expect a quick defeat for their cause. As one private put it: "You see, when you look at the facts, and when you see that today American troops in Vietnam exceed 300,000, and that more and more Americans directly participate in the war, how can peace come, how can anyone hope for the end of the war to come?" (21) In other words, this respondent did not conclude that such a large American force could terminate the war quickly in its favor.

Similarly, a corporal, when asked whether the influx of American troops had had any effect on his men's morale replied: "Yes. They thought it would be harder for them to end the war and liberate the South, because the more ARVN soldiers they killed, the more Americans would arrive to take their place." (22) Harder -- not hopeless. Another corporal, on the same subject: "In my view the war will last longer because we now have to fight the Americans, too.
As to the effects of the American presence on the outcome of the war, I don't know." (14)

Hand in hand with the conviction, held by some VC soldiers, that American assistance to the GVN will not lead to a VC defeat (although, on the whole they do not hold positive expectations of victory either, as we shall see later), is the feeling encountered in some interviews that with some effort, the Americans can be coped with on the field of battle. At least one NVA squad leader gave evidence that such efforts to put Americans in their place had worked, as shown by this cool appraisal: "I have had contact with American soldiers. Generally speaking, they have their strong points: They are very brave and their marksmanship is good. Their weak points are, they are too much used to modern battlefields, and to apply the same tactics to this battlefield is not advisable. Take this example: When they move toward a certain position, they all move forward at once. Meanwhile, the other side uses guerrilla tactics -- a few fighters hide here, fire a few rounds, and run to another place. When the Americans move in where the shots have come from, they find nothing. Meanwhile the same few fighters fire a few more shots from their new hideouts. These shots cause the Americans casualties, dead or wounded." (23) The man sounds rather confident.

As to American aims, do individual VC captives or ralliers ever say anything positive, or do they ever report anything positive about such aims being said by their comrades?* Not according to the available data.

*As, for example, many Wehrmacht soldiers did among themselves prior to capture in World War II.
Thus, if being "soft on Americans" could be regarded as a factor gnawing away at cohesion, that factor seems absent. True, some VC prisoners and ralliers occasionally make positive statements about American aims and behavior, but they invariably add that they came to hold such positive views only after capture or surrender, and not while they still served in the VC. There is, then, much reason to assume that the VC machine derives considerable strength and cohesion from a genuinely felt rather than merely propagandistically spread or superficially accepted hostility to Americans. This may be regarded as reinforced by their vague, yet presumably quite sustaining, feelings that the Americans can be coped with in one way or another.
IV. THE ENDURABLE BATTLE EXPERIENCE

This war -- not quite adequately described as "mobile warfare" or by any other term so far designed for it -- is in any event distinguished from more conventional war by the spasmodic nature of its engagements. Despite their high kill rate, and, on the whole, favorable kill ratio, American forces conduct many search-without-destroy missions; and, on the VC side, the men, on the whole, move frequently and fight rarely. Statements from the interviewees seem to suggest that the average VC military unit is engaged in full-scale action only a few times a year.*

Apparently, the principal aim of the VC, at least until the fighting grew in intensity in recent months south of the DMZ and elsewhere, was to remain undetected, inflict damage sporadically, interfere with American pacification efforts, engage in counterattrition, retain cohesion and some form of initiative, give a reasonably good account of themselves if cornered, and keep control, primarily by their presence, over the "liberated" regions and a minimum grip on those that are contested. This "evade-and-hold" strategy, punctured by ambushes and other brief aggressive thrusts of the "hit-and-run" variety,

*For figures on combat exposure, see Appendix A.
has produced a situation in which most VC prisoners or ralliers interrogated have participated only in one, two, or at the most three engagements. And many of these engagements, as described by the interviewees, were ephemeral and hardly what one would call a battle.

Although the reader may find it slightly tedious to acquaint himself with the following detailed accounts of combat experience as related by the VC, these accounts are included here in order to provide a glimpse of what the pressures of war look like from the other side. How devastating, actually, is the combat experience against superior American fire power and mobility for the VC in the field? In order to bend an enemy to one's will, two interlocking requirements must be met: On the physical plane, the enemy must suffer actual losses that are unacceptable to him, and on the psychological plane there must be taking place a gradual destruction of his fighting spirit. Destruction of his fighting spirit is likely to manifest itself primarily in a decline of organizational control, when hard-core "movers" on all levels no longer find it possible to infuse their own fighting vigor into the soft-core majority, or when the cadre turn into not-so-hard-core men themselves. Although physical losses incurred by an army tend to lead to a decline in organizational control and -- eventually -- a collapse of the fighting spirit, it may not do so automatically, in which case the enemy fights "to the last man," and an extraordinary high kill rate must be attained to bring the
enemy to bay. It is apparent at first glance that both -- the infliction of a high casualty rate and a concomitant destruction of the enemy's organizational control mechanism and fighting spirit -- are harder to obtain in Vietnam by military action than they were in Korea, where General James Van Fleet was able, in a well planned counterattack in May/June 1951, to inflict upon a substantial proportion of the Chinese army the kind of punishment and loss that led to the desired result. In Vietnam, the enemy is harder to destroy, physically or morally. He is elusive and capable of recuperation. So far only relatively few of his units are being chewed up at a time. And he derives special comfort from the fact that the U.S./GVN forces have so far been frustrated in their major endeavor.

It would be a mistake to conclude that our great superiority in fire power and mobility is exposing the VC to perpetual and savage punishment, under which they ought to crack sooner rather than later. In reality, only a relatively small proportion of the VC order of battle is ground up at any one time, unlike the Chicoms in late May-early June 1951. The following examples of how the combat situation looks from the enemy side must give us pause.

A Main Force private, captured in early 1966, describes his only battle experience as follows: "We walked for one day and one night.... We arrived at Haoi Son [Binh Dinh Province] at 1 P.M. We immediately cooked our meal and distributed rice to everyone.... At 11 A.M.
the next day I heard firing. An artillery shell exploded right behind the nearest house, and a piece of shrapnel hit me in the back. I was very frightened and ran to the ricefields where I lay down in a puddle of water. . . . Later in the afternoon the GVN soldiers stormed the place and captured me. . . ." (24)

Another Main Force private, captured at about the same time, had this to report: "Three other men and I went to work for the food production unit. It was about 7:30 when two L-19's appeared overhead. Then two fighter-bombers came to bomb. I took cover in a trench. . . . After a while a lot of helicopters landed. Then poison gas [?] was sprayed into my trench, and I was captured." (17)

The next case, also a Main Force private, for whom the war was over somewhat later in the year, differed from the two other cases given above in that he cracked, tried to rally, was caught and "re-educated," only to make a second, successful attempt at surrendering. He relates: "Early in the morning five P-57's came to strafe and drop gasoline bombs which burned the stored rice. My unit withdrew to the mountains. Later, the ARVN troops came to attack our position. We had to withstand the attack for two nights and two days." This was too much for our soldier: "I ran away from my unit and hid in a villager's house." But he didn't get away: "When the ARVN withdrew, my unit sent a platoon to the village to pick up the dead. I was found and taken back to the mountains and made to listen to political lectures for
the next two days." What was said in these lectures? "We were told by the cadre that South Vietnam was in turmoil, and that we all had the duty to liberate it. We were to liberate all the rural areas and push the GVN into the cities; then we'd use all our forces to attack the cities and wipe out the GVN." However, much of what the cadre said was lost on the soldier ("The cadre said a lot more, but I don't remember"), who was apparently beyond redemption: "I couldn't stand the hardships, so I escaped." (21)

Somewhat more dramatic, but also short, is the encounter reported by an assistant company commander and a company political officer in a Main Force unit, in response to the question: "What was the most terrible battle you participated in lately?" The man, an infiltrator from the North and a Party member, who rallied in August 1966, answered: "The last and most terrible battle I participated in was the attack on a military convoy moving from Nang Mao to Long My [Chuong Thien Province] in October 1965." Asked to describe the course of the engagement, the respondent said: "The attack was carried out by [our] 2nd Regiment. First of all the first company of my 309th battalion attacked the Long My strategic hamlet, so the other units would be in a position to intercept some GVN reinforcement troops expected to arrive from Long My district headquarters. At 5 A.M. we had all finished digging foxholes, but we weren't ready to open fire until 3 P.M. Thus, even though we had learned in advance that there would be 32 trucks
carrying GVN reinforcements, we couldn't intercept them when they passed at 8 A.M." Why was the unit not ready to strike at the convoy? "The telephone wires connecting our position with the regimental command post, which was one kilometer behind us, were only then being installed; the regimental commander, therefore, couldn't give us orders in time."

Typical or not, the company commander's unwillingness to strike seems to indicate a lack of daring and initiative, unless orders not to proceed without regimental authorization were very firm. In any event, the convoy went by unscathed: "By the time the convoy passed I was lying 100 meters from the road and I saw it pull two 105 howitzers that made my mouth water [A noteworthy display of martial spirit -- Ed.]. As we had already missed the opportunity to attack the GVN reinforcements, and as we couldn't withdraw in daytime, we had to stay put." Soon enough, a target of opportunity offered itself: "After a while we learned that twelve other trucks carrying new GVN recruits were to pass by, and as we were already on the spot we waited for them."

This time contact was made: "At 3 P.M. we opened fire. The battle lasted only an hour, but helicopters, Cormorans, and jets came to bomb us until dark. I thought I was about to be killed because bombs exploded near my foxhole. The enemy had ten military trucks and two civilian trucks packed with new GVN recruits, and only one of the civilian trucks was able to escape from our ambush."
To accomplish this feat, the VC unit apparently took heavy losses. "There were more than forty VC killed. Our side claimed one GVN battalion destroyed, and more than twenty enemy soldiers captured. But," added the former cadre, "I myself only saw two Negroes captured." (25) The respondent himself was neither harmed nor captured, but decided -- perhaps on the spot -- to rally to the GVN, a decision he made good only ten months later.

In any event, despite the serious losses reported in connection with the last episode, these accounts do not exactly sound like the Battle of Stalingrad or, in fact, any combat experience in which men must endure the prolonged pounding of modern weapons. Rather, the accounts suggest skirmishes in which the soldiers are thoroughly shaken by GVN/U.S. fire power, but after which the ever vigilant cadre take great and apparently often successful pains to rekindle their men's spirits, convincing them, and presumably themselves, that a great and heroic purpose is being effectively served by their peripatetic jungle existence. And for this form of persuasion (and actual physical recuperation) there seems to be ample time because of the low incidence rate of combat.

It should also be observed in this connection that there is a considerable difference between the "hardships" of which so many captives and ralliers complain, such as poor food, much moving around, separation from the family, inclement weather and so on, and the actual
terrors of battle. Even if the danger of constantly impending battle or punishment from the air should increase fear and reluctance to go on serving in the VC, the difference between the specific hardships endured by the VC and the effects of prolonged combat (which most VC apparently do not have to endure) may well be considerable. Whereas habituation to constant and heavy combat is hard to attain for any force, habituation to the kind of hardships the VC encounter may be far easier to accomplish. Infrequent exposure to combat may also take the edge off the enemy's manpower shortages. When manpower shortages occur in wars with more defined front lines, the enemy does not just suffer strategically because his MLR is spread out too thinly and his freedom of movement impaired. He also suffers psychologically, because for lack of reserves he must leave his men so long in the line that their endurance falters.

It should be considered, moreover, that some of the reportedly depressing effects of the hardships suffered by the VC might be alleviated by the exhilarative effects of success. By avoiding contact with the GVN/U.S. forces, which quite clearly seek it, stubbornly outlasting an enemy who impatiently seeks termination of the war, and denying him his basic objectives for months and even years, the VC attain a sort of protracted state of negative* victory which might go a long way in sustaining their morale and cohesion.

*And perhaps a not even so negative history, if their aim is to outlast the GVN/U.S.
But do not these long and open-ended evasive VC tactics wear down the patience of the men and their cadre? On this aspect of protraction, one respondent provided the laconic comment: "The instructor taught us that the Revolution is not a short-term business." (26) And not all soldiers regard what the war demands of them as that much of a hardship anyway. One private, when asked whether the steady moving around in the jungle was not a great burden, replied: "No. We just pick up and go." (24) Also, promotion to cadre level often does much to alleviate, for the individual soldier, what seemed a great hardship before.

After actual engagements, the soldiers are given rest periods which, however, have been reported by some respondents to have become shorter as the war went on. A Main Force fighter, who rallied in December of 1966, related that "after each engagement we were allowed to rest 15 to 20 days. Recently ... the men had at most one week of rest." But that did not mean the men had to resume fighting: "If there wasn't any operation planned, the men would have to carry fish sauce and rice." (27) Thus, while this man said there was less actual rest, he did not deny there was at least some recuperation from combat.

Finally, some basic soldierly virtues seem to help some of the fighters in combat, when it occurs: "According to my fellow fighters who served in combat units, they were frightened when they were about to engage in battle. But after they had started to fight, the smell of gunpowder went to their heads, and they were no longer afraid." (27)
Naturally, the many descriptions of rather light combat exposure must not obscure the fact that on other occasions the VC suffer very severe punishment indeed. For example: "In a battle at Tan Thant crossroads between two Front battalions and GVN troops, my company lost two-thirds of its men. In my platoon only ten survived." And again: "In a raid against a GVN battalion in Tam Quan area, my unit [a recon company] lost half of its men...." (27)

However, in such cases, when a unit has been severely mauled, the VC seem to rely on what may well be their heaviest gun -- the cadre in their capacity as consoler, comforter, propagandist, leader. "Usually after a defeat 15 days were enough for the cadres to raise the men's fighting spirits.... The cadre used to strengthen the Party members' morale first and then the morale of the Youth Group members. That would account for two-thirds of the unit. Then they would come around to the fighters." (27) The situation, apparently, was generally such as to afford the cadre at least these 15 needed days. Another soldier, an infiltrator private from the North, speaks of a similar time span needed for military resurrection: "Every time we lost, there was a thought correction session." -- "How long did it take you to correct your thinking?" -- "One week." (13)

What can we conclude from the foregoing? The materials on VC combat experiences seem to suggest that service in the VC, though surely not a pleasant life, is endurable, mainly because the low incidence and the often low intensity and short duration of combat make
the men in the VC capable of absorbing the rigors of their military existence under present combat conditions, perhaps indefinitely. This fact, combined with the generally reported powers of near-prestidigitation on the part of cadres in "raising the morale," "mobilizing the spirit," or "correcting the thoughts" of the fighters before an engagement or after a defeat, seems to be a prime element in the continuing cohesion of the VC forces. It seems also to be an important element in the resilient morale of the fighters who, quite easily frightened by fire and discouraged by defeat, often seem to snap back again under the various ministrations of their leaders, as when they are told, and apparently believe, that their cause is good, their enemy vulnerable, and that fear of death must and can be overcome. Given the present situation, combat for the VC as a whole does not seem unendurable; this would appear to be one facet in the phenomenology of their continued cohesion.
V. INTERNAL ACCOMMODATION

Great and lengthy efforts and sacrifices are more easily borne if performed in a climate of cooperation with others who are flexible in the give and take of daily contact, provided, of course, that chaos does not set in and the fundamental objectives of such cooperation are not lost. The VC world seems to provide such a climate. Much that is more rigid in our own army system seems more flexible in the VC environment -- the manner in which men are drafted, trained, led, punished, rewarded, discharged. In general, this seems to apply more to local and irregular forces than to Main Force units, but even the latter -- including NVA units -- are apparently so operated that it is difficult to uncover rigid rules for much within the compass of VC concerns or activities.

Of course, in our Army too, a tendency exists -- as men move further away from garrisons and closer to battle -- to "throw the book away" and improvise, with all the resulting flexibility in functions and relationships which that implies, but by no means on the level we find in the VC. There the well-known patterns of "patient persuasion," "egalitarianism," and other social relations seem to have been taken over in toto -- and perhaps with greater benefit to the forces, owing to the guerrilla-type war in Vietnam -- from the Chinese Communist model.*

*See Alex George, The Chinese Communist Army in Action, pp. 36-37.
An NVA corporal, when asked about what the attitude and behavior of the cadres and fighters was, said: "Respect the superiors and be nice to subordinates. To the older ones, we had to show respect. To the other fighters we had to be friendly, nice, and were not to quarrel with them." (3) Add this deposition from an unidentified witness, in answer to the question how his friends obtained promotions: "They got promoted because they were gentle with others, not hot-tempered or using strong language in their dealings with them." As a result of all this, the VC army seems strikingly undisciplined, with persuasion rather than orders, forebearance rather than punishment, the generally applied rule. Reading the interviews one often feels transported into a group of people who are principally concerned with treating each other with care and respect -- no matter how roughly they may treat others outside their compass, or, occasionally and atypically, one of their own. This helps, it appears, to alleviate hardships, dissolve dark thoughts of death and defeat, relieve pangs of homesickness, reduce fears of the enemy and death, ban doubts concerning the cause or its ultimate success, and maintain confidence and trust.*

A Main Force private reported that during long treks his cadre "asked those who were strong and healthy to help the weak and sick. The cadres even carried loads for the sick themselves. Apart from that, they constantly

*Such practices do not occur fortuitously. The cadres are trained to promote them. VC leaders apparently seek to create this way of life, in an effort at building small and cohesive social groups -- as do (or did) the cadres in the Chinese Army.