

personal reasons, Vann soon returned to Vietnam and, in time, became the highest ranking civilian advisor in the country. Until his untimely death in a helicopter crash in 1972, he was recognized as one of the most knowledgeable individuals about the war.

Lacking appreciation of the revolutionary nature of the challenge, U.S. policymakers were optimistic about solving what they saw as essentially a military problem. Despite talk about winning hearts and minds, U.S. leaders never persuaded South Vietnamese President Diem to undertake the social, economic, and political reforms needed to win support for his government. He failed to address the needs of the many landless farmers and his village security program of strategic hamlets was widely resented.

In November, Diem was killed in a U.S. approved coup. Kennedy was assassinated three weeks later. Lyndon Johnson inherited a political and military quagmire with no end in sight. For the next year and a half, Saigon governments came and went in a series of coups, and the war effort virtually stopped.

The U.S. Enters Into Combat: 1965-1967

Using the authority of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution instead of an official declaration of war by Congress, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent U.S. forces into combat in Vietnam in 1965. Already committed to an ambitious program of social reforms, Johnson was reluctant to jeopardize support by plunging the country into a full-scale war. He also was mindful of strong public opposition to sending American troops to fight in another land war in Asia, especially given North Vietnam's mutual defense pact with China. He expressed confidence that a great power like the United States could manage the war in Vietnam long enough for the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government to establish themselves.

Vietcong soldiers advance along a small irrigation waterway.



Against the U.S., the Vietcong followed the same strategy of protracted warfare that the Vietminh had used to defeat the French. Because of their disadvantage in manpower and firepower, Vietcong guerrillas avoided any direct engagements where they did not have a numerical superiority. Instead, they practiced hit-and-run tactics to drag out the war, undermine the morale of U.S. forces and exhaust the patience of the American public. This also gave the Vietcong time to win the ideological battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

In response, U.S. military leaders planned a “war of attrition” against the guerrillas. The goal was to destroy the enemy in the field at a rate fast enough to reach the “cross-over point,” that is, the point at which casualties would exceed additions to the enemy force. At that point, the enemy was supposed to recognize that victory was not possible and quit the fight. General Westmoreland predicted that the cross-over point would be reached in late 1967 or early 1968.

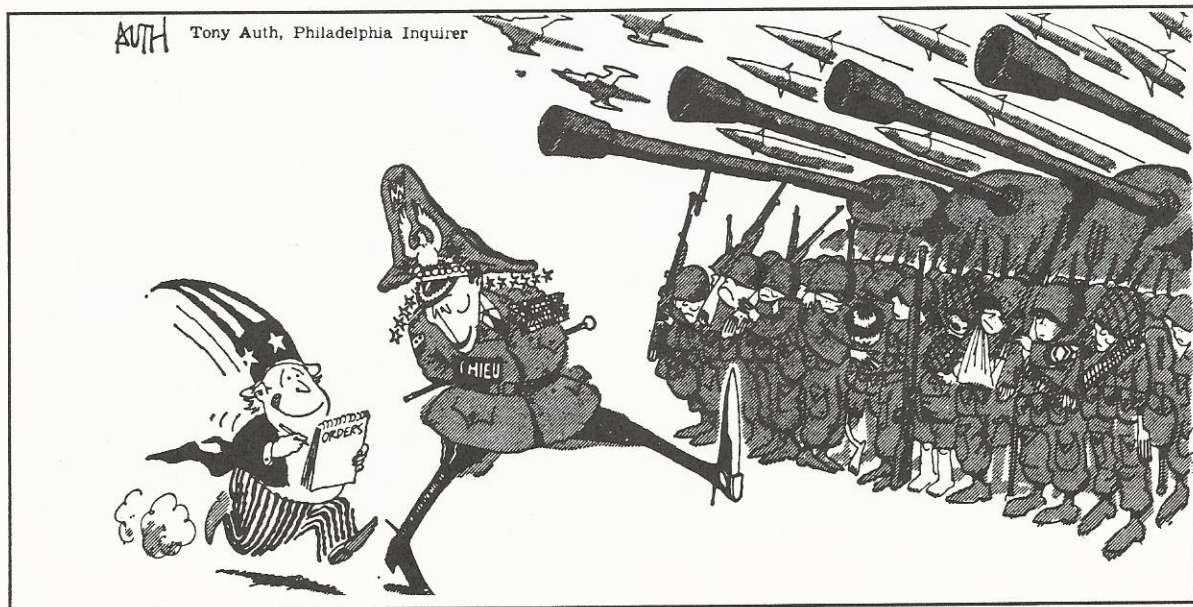
To ensure the success of its war plan, U.S. commanders developed three separate but related strategies. First, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps would conduct “search and destroy” missions, large-scale ground combat operations designed to accelerate the pace of combat and casualties. Second, U.S. troops would destroy villages friendly to the enemy. As one U.S. General

explained to *The New York Times* correspondent, R. W. Apple, “You’ve got to dry up the sea the guerrillas swim in—that’s the peasants—and the best way to do that is blast the hell out of their villages so they’ll come into our refugee camps. No villages, no guerrillas: simple.” The final effect of this campaign would be to create “free fire zones” where anyone in the area was “automatically suspected” of being Vietcong or a Vietcong sympathizer and fired upon.

Third, the U.S. Air Force and Navy would conduct an extensive bombing campaign in North Vietnam to undermine support for the guerrillas and cut off the flow of men and supplies to the south. A major target was the “Ho Chi Minh Trail,” the major overland supply route from north to south. The Trail was 250 miles long, ran through Laos, and included an estimated 6,000 miles of roadways, pathways, streams, and rivers down which soldiers and supplies could move. This became especially important by 1966 when the People’s Army of (North) Vietnam (PAVN) began sending entire regiments into battle in the south. It was reasoned that, once guerrillas were cut off from their supplies and reinforcements, their number would be decreased that much faster.

Counting Kills

Some critics of U.S. policy warned that the French also had fought a war of attrition and they had lost. But



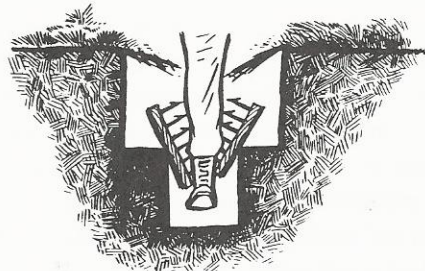
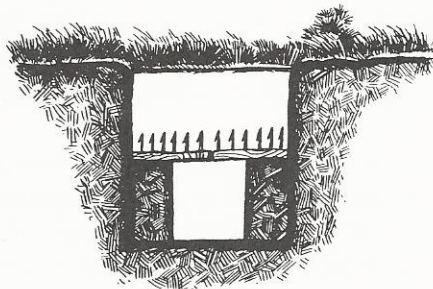
U.S. leaders were certain they would succeed where the French had failed. In 1962, Douglas Pike responded to a MACV general's remark that the goal in Vietnam was "to kill VC, pure and simple," by explaining that the French had killed many of the enemy and still lost. The general replied, "Didn't kill enough Vietcong." Each military unit's Order of Battle section kept detailed records of enemy units and even individual personnel by name. Great computers in Saigon tracked Vietcong recruits, defectors, North Vietnamese infiltration, and allied captives.

The most important measure of progress in the war was the number of enemy killed, popularly known as the "body count." The pressure for producing a high body count ran from the Pentagon and White House down to small field units. The success of a leader was determined by how many enemy were killed under his command. A low body count often meant removal from command.

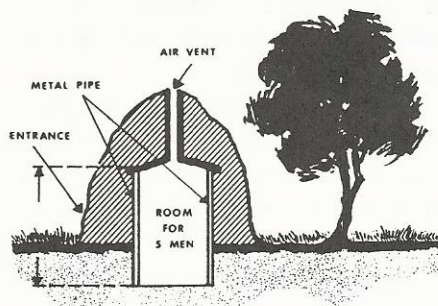
Faced with such pressures, many resorted to falsifying reports. Marine Lt. Col. John Buchanan reveals, "We claimed that for every American that was killed, we killed 13 NVA's. Some of those enemy were old women and children. Sometimes we would count shin bones and body parts. War is not an exact science, and everybody exaggerates." Robert Mall, an enlisted man, reported that in his unit "a weapon captured was counted as five bodies. In other words, if you shoot a guy who's got a gun and you get that gun, you've shot six people."

In 1974, Douglas Kinnard, Brigadier General in Vietnam, polled all the other U.S. generals who had served in the war. Some 64 percent of the 173 responded. Sixty-one percent of the respondents said the body count was "often inflated." As for careerism as a factor in command, 87 percent considered it a problem, 37 percent said it was "serious."

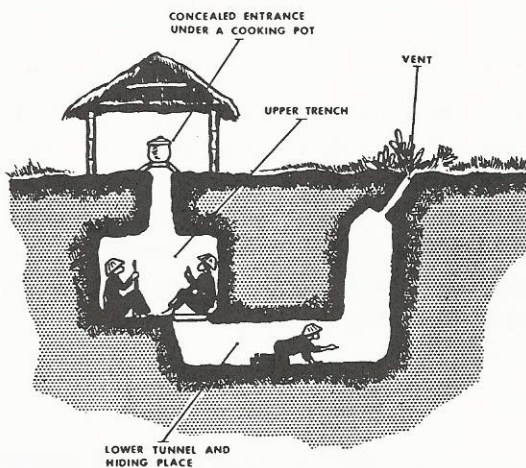
Westmoreland believed the enemy was preparing to move beyond guerrilla tactics to larger scale operations. This would give U.S. units, with their superior firepower, a chance to engage and kill the enemy in greater numbers. He sought increased U.S. forces to conduct search and destroy missions. The plan was for the infantry to "hump the boonies" to make contact with the enemy in the field and then call in artillery barrages, helicopter gunships, fighter-bombers and airmobile reinforcements to



Punji beartrap



Haystack used for hiding place



Hiding places under local homes

destroy them with minimal American casualties. As General Glen A. Walker explained to reporters, "You don't fight this fellow rifle to rifle. You locate him and back away. Blow the hell out of him and then police up."

To support the attrition strategy, Westmoreland presided over the construction of an elaborate infrastructure of roads, military installations, air fields, ports, artillery firebases, etc. While a remarkable engineering accomplishment, Westmoreland's strategy required a great many soldiers to be involved in construction projects rather than combat.

A number of large-scale operations in 1966 and 1967, which sought to accelerate the attrition strategy, looked good on paper. They uncovered caches of weapons, munitions, and supplies; destroyed tunnel complexes; and produced high body count. However, they also had heavy social and political costs, such as those detailed in journalist Jonathan Schell's *The Village of Ben Suc*, an account of how a whole village of "Vietcong sympathizers" was bulldozed and its people forcibly relocated. Such tactics did not help and probably hurt the U.S. war effort.

It was already evident by late 1966 that the attrition strategy was failing. The U.S. and South Vietnamese could not kill the enemy as fast as the Vietcong could recruit replacements or the North Vietnamese march troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Despite American efforts to search out the enemy and engage them in combat, most contacts were brief with only a small number of enemy killed.

For the most part, the NVA/VC forces dictated when and where they would fight. One study reported that almost 90 percent of all combat engagements were initiated by the enemy. The guerrillas learned to strike quickly, in the words of a Marine medic "kill a couple of people and split before anybody got there." They avoided the massive U.S. firepower by slipping into the villages, fleeing to impenetrable jungle, disappearing into tunnel complexes, or crossing the border into Laos and Cambodia, which were off limits to American ground action until late in the war.

Methods Backfire

A more controversial aspect of search and destroy was that many soldiers believed it was premised on the use of ground troops as bait for Vietcong ambushes.

Captain Michael O'Mera explained to Congress:

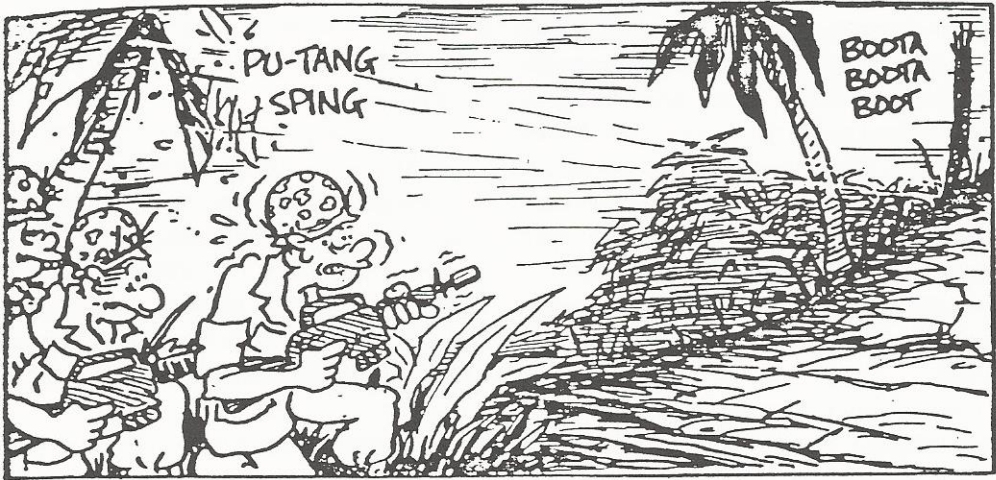
They made their ground units bait by sending them into the swamps, into the jungles, into the rice paddies where they would search for the enemy and at night set up in a night-logger or a combat-patrol position, and from this position they were most likely to get attacked. This is where the enemy would most likely hit them. They were bait.

As the war progressed and this suspicion spread, many troops began to resist. By 1968, some units even faked night patrols, going outside the camp a few hundred yards and spending the night there rather than going further out to set an ambush. This attitude became known as "search and avoid." Other soldiers sought a way out of the war by shooting, injuring or exposing themselves to disease.

The most serious reaction was called "fragging" because soldiers would use fragmentation grenades to warn or kill commanders who seemed too willing to risk their charges' lives on hazardous assignments. Dr. Charles Levy, a psychiatrist assigned to the 3rd Marine Division, estimated that over 500 attacks occurred in the first eight months of 1969, whereas the official figure was 96 for the entire year. Victims were classified as either wounded or killed in action by enemy forces, not U.S. troops. Sociologist John Helmer found that 58 percent of the combat vets he interviewed replied "yes" to the question "Did you ever personally know of a fragging incident in your unit directed against NCOs (sergeants) or officers?"

It was widely known that ten thousand dollars was offered for fragging Major General Melvin Zais, commander of the 101st Airborne (Airmobile) Division, for ordering an attack on "Hamburger Hill" in May 1969, when his troops took very heavy casualties for no apparent strategic advantage. One of his men explained, "Every time we radioed him our position, he flew overhead in a copter and we got hit." Nobody collected the reward. The army acknowledges 600 cases of fragging over 1969-1971. The actual number will never be known, but search and destroy operations for U.S. troops were soon phased out.

Another problem with the search and destroy operations was that, while troops were rewarded for producing a high body count, there was no reliable method for certifying the identities of many of those suspected or



killed. This was an enormous problem in a revolutionary war in which almost anyone could be friend or foe.

The dilemma of whether or not to shoot plagued GIs in the field and still haunts many suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder today. Some went by the book and only fired on those carrying a weapon. Others fired at anything that ran. Given the rewards for reporting a high body count, however, everyone's moral dilemma was covered by what came to be called the "meer gook rule," that is "if it's dead and it's Vietnamese, it's VC." The massive killing of innocent civilians by U.S. troops drove more and more neutral Vietnamese into the ranks of the Vietcong.

Other tactics had their own costs. The use of antipersonnel bombs offended sensibilities all over the world. Napalm bombs burned up available oxygen and asphyxiated those in the area. The bombs also spit out a jelly-like gasoline that clung to the flesh and burned to the bone. Other bombs scattered a broadside of steel

pellets or barbed-wire steel splinters that were useless against military installations but deadly against humans. Unfortunately, it was often the slow and weak—women, children and the elderly—who suffered from the attacks.

The bombing, bulldozing or burning of villages believed to be friendly to the Vietcong caused the enemy logistical problems. And the massive defoliation campaign, almost eighteen million gallons of herbicides sprayed over 4.5 million acres of forest and cropland, deprived the Vietcong of food and of ground cover from which to launch ambushes. However, these extreme methods also caused much suffering to the innocents.

The chemical warfare program damaged U.S. esteem in world opinion, provoked protest at home, and turned more Vietnamese against the Americans. One study found that three of four peasants whose crops had been poisoned said they hated the U.S. and South

Rules of Engagement or "Organized Butchery"?

"...we were fighting in the cruelest kind of conflict, a people's war. It was no orderly campaign, as in Europe, but a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws; a war in which each soldier fought for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, not caring how he killed in that personal cause or how many or in what manner and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare—that code of battlefield ethics that attempted to humanize an essentially inhuman war. According to those 'rules of engagement,' it was morally right to shoot an unarmed Vietnamese who was running, but wrong to shoot one who was standing or walking; it was wrong to shoot an enemy prisoner at close range, but right for a sniper at long range to kill an enemy soldier who was no more able than a prisoner to defend himself; it was wrong for infantrymen to destroy a village with white phosphorus grenades, but right for a fighter pilot to drop napalm on it. Ethics seemed to be a matter of distance and technology. You could never go wrong if you killed people at long range with sophisticated weapons. And then there was that inspiring order issued by General Green: kill VC. In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked, 'What can we do for our country?' and our country answered, 'Kill VC.' That was the strategy, the best our best military minds could come up with: organized butchery. But organized or not, butchery was butchery, so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none?..."—Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978: 33-4.

Gliding Baskets

“Eight Six Foxtrot—Eight Six Foxtrot.
This is One One Zulu. Over.”

The woman in blue
Carried the weight swiftly, with grace,
Her face hidden by her
Conical rice straw hat.

“One One Zulu—this is Eight Six Foxtrot. Go.”
“Roger Eight Six. I have Fire Mission.
Dink in the open, Grid: Bravo Sierra,
Five Six Niner, Four Six Five, Range:
Three thousand, Proximity: Eight hundred. Over”

The two heavy baskets
Balanced on tips
Of the springing Chogi stick
Glided close to the hard smooth path.

“Read back, One One Zulu.”
“Roger Copy, Eight Six.”
“Shot, on the way, wait.”
“Shot out, Eight Six.”

A sighing 105 mm round slides through its parabola
Then the explosive tearing at the steel which surrounds it,
And the shrapnel catches the gliding baskets,
And they crumple with the woman in blue.

*near An Trang
August 14, 1969*

—Frank A. Cross Jr.



Vietnamese governments. Some already were opposed, but others were provoked by the assaults on their villages. Thus, the U.S. military's own tactics were causing them to lose the important political battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

As the war dragged on, it became clear that U.S. strategy was stalemated by the enemy's clever and tenacious defense. As long as it was willing to stay the course, the U.S. could control militarily any area it chose. However, it could never establish sufficient political control over enough of the country to leave the fighting to the ARVN, let alone to neutralize the insurgency. The question was how long the American public and its representatives in Congress would tolerate the escalating costs of this stalemate.

North Vietnam could not conquer the South as long as it was defended by U.S. troops. However, its interest in the struggle was deeper and longer standing than that of the U.S. As Premier Pham Van Dong explained to Bernard Fall, they were willing to fight for decades, even centuries, as they had done against the Chinese. He predicted that the U.S. would become frustrated with the long, inconclusive war and eventually give up. Thus, the NVA/VC did not have to win, but merely to keep from losing.

The Air War: 1965-1967

Most American leaders disputed Dong's prediction of eventual NVA/VC victory. They believed that their bombing campaign would make the war too costly for the North Vietnamese. The air war campaign, called "Rolling Thunder," had three related objectives: (1) to break the will of North Vietnamese leaders to support the Vietcong in the south, (2) to destroy North Vietnam's industrial base, and (3) to stop the flow of men and supplies to the south.

The unit of measurement for bombing missions is called the "sortie," one flight by one plane. Throughout 1965, the sortie rate climbed, from 3,600 in April to an average of 5,500 a month by the end of the year. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor explained that U.S. air attacks would escalate until leaders in the North came to see a "vision of inevitable, ultimate destruction if they do not change their ways!" Some 134 targets in North Vietnam were bombed in 1965, many of them more than once.