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## **The Unknown War: Army of the Republic of Vietnam Combat Operations 1962-1963**

Justin Major

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THE UNKNOWN WAR: ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM COMBAT  
OPERATIONS 1962-1963

by

Justin Paul Major

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Humanities  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The American historiography of the Vietnam War has tended to focus on the actions of the United States Armed Forces, the People's Army of Vietnam, and the Viet Cong, while the history of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) has remained largely untold. ARVN, when mentioned, is usually portrayed as incompetent, ineffective, and even cowardly. Recently, historians like Andrew Wiest and Mark Moyar have challenged this view of ARVN that was originally advanced by journalists Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam. Moyar even suggested that ARVN was winning the war until the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. However, there has been no in-depth examination of ARVN military performance during this period to prove Moyar's point.

This study seeks to evaluate the success of ARVN combat operations against the Viet Cong and to highlight its central role in the Vietnam War using the records of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, the Neil Sheehan Papers, and memoirs and articles from South Vietnamese soldiers. Despite some Viet Cong victories, such as the battle of Ap Bac, ARVN won numerous forgotten battles that demonstrate their battlefield dominance at that time. This thesis argues that from 1962-1963 ARVN was successfully defeating the Viet Cong on the battlefield. At least militarily, ARVN was making significant progress in the Vietnam War.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the kind help of many people. First, I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Wiest, my Committee Chair, for his assistance, advice, and support throughout this process, which has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Heather Stur for serving on my Committee and her suggestion that I make use of Vietnamese sources without which this thesis would not have been possible. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Kyle Zelner for being on my Committee and for his assistance in editing this thesis. All of them have been a great help to me in my time at the University of Southern Mississippi and I am grateful for such wonderful mentors.

Thanks are also reserved the School of Humanities whose financial assistance in the form of travel grants and a graduate assistantship has made this thesis possible. I would also like to thank the history faculty for all of their work in helping me pursue a Master of Arts in U.S. History. The South East Asia Summer Studies Institute has my sincere gratitude for allowing me to pursue the study of the Vietnamese language, which has enabled me to better understand the Vietnam War. Lastly, special thanks are due to Merle Pribbenow whose clear, accurate translations of Vietnamese documents has allowed me to produce a thesis that gives new insight into the direction of the Vietnam War in 1962 and 1963.

## DEDICATION

Above all I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather Paul Trichell who served in the U.S. Navy for twenty-one years through World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. He first sparked my interest in Military History with the war stories he told me when I was a child. Throughout my childhood, he encouraged me to further pursue the study of history. The fact that he served in Vietnam during the period covered by this thesis is one of the main reasons I was motivated to study it. I would also like to thank my parents, Daniel Major Jr. and Susan Major for their love and support, which has enabled me to pursue my dreams in life. Thanks are also due to my grandparents, Daniel Major Sr. and Evelyn Major, as well as Dora Trichell. Their love inspires me to work hard to achieve all that I can. Special thanks are in order for my twin brother, Jarrett Major. He has always been my best friend and his assistance during my research and writing process has been invaluable. I would also like to thank my dogs, Billy and Bobby, who have brightened up my day many times and eased the stress of completing a thesis. I am blessed to have such an amazing and supportive family

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## South Vietnam 1966-1967

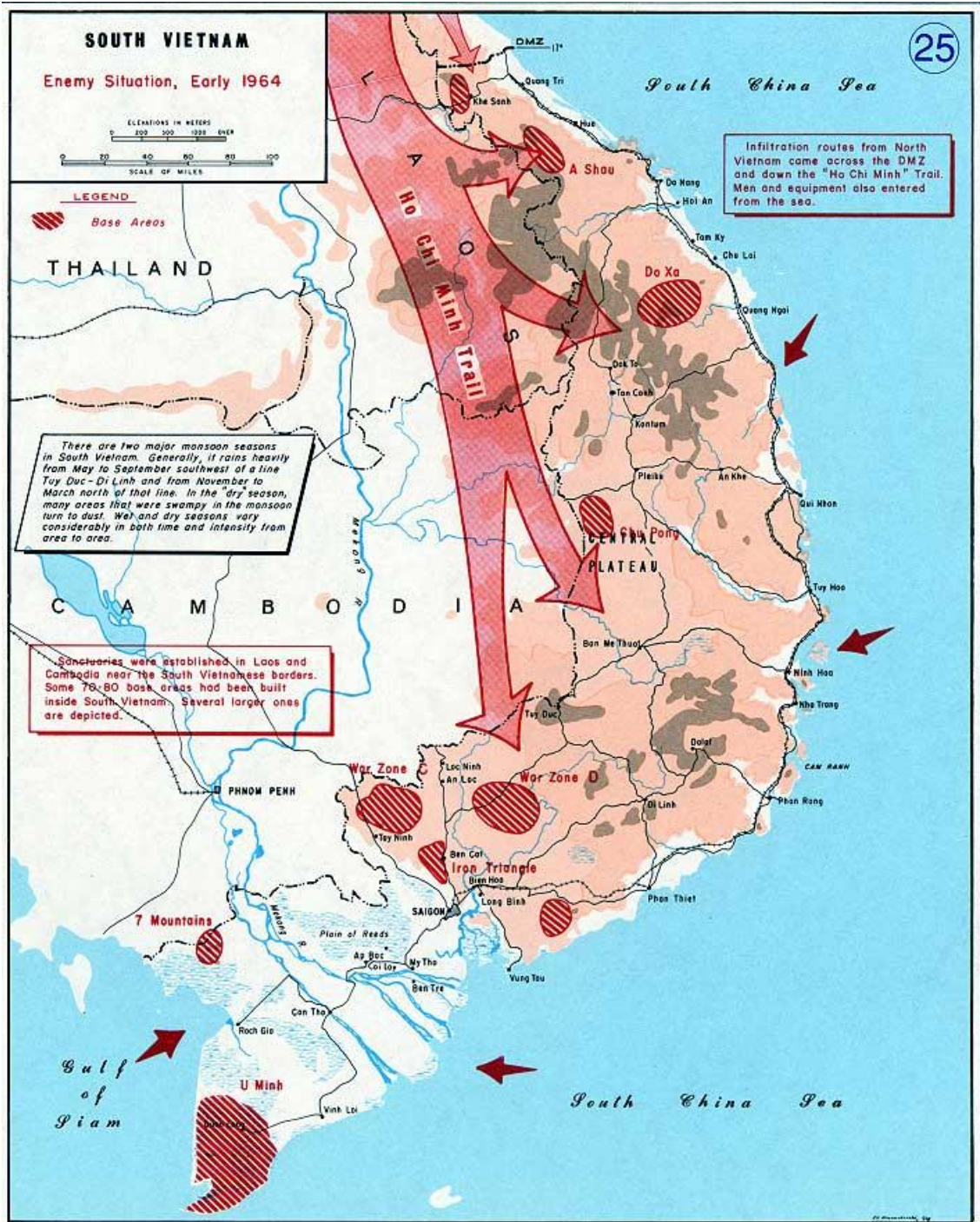


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<sup>1</sup> MacGarrigle, George L., *The United States Army in Vietnam: Combat Operations, Taking the Offensive, October 1966-October 1967*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1998.



## The Enemy Situation Early 1964



<sup>2</sup> United States Military Academy, “The Enemy Situation Early 1964,” Accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/vietnam/vietnam%2520war%2520map%252025.jpg>

## CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Ly Tong Ba fought in the Vietnam War for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) from the early 1950s until the war's end in 1975. Along the way, he was promoted to general and led South Vietnamese troops in many of the most momentous battles of their brief history, including the battle of Ap Bac and the defense of Kontum during the Easter Offensive of 1972. At the end of the war, he was thrown into a communist reeducation camp and stayed there for many years before he was finally allowed to move to the United States. There, as he contemplated the past, one thought continued to bother him. "Even though [ARVN] won hundreds of battles, . . . not one single ARVN unit, . . . ever received any public praise or encouragement. However, when on one single occasion we encountered unavoidable difficulties, both our friends and our enemies took turns slandering us."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately after 55 years, Ba's conclusion about this common portrayal of ARVN still holds true.

ARVN's military operations during the early period of the war from 1962 to 1963 have been largely ignored by American historians. Most American histories of the war during its early years seek to answer one of two questions: how did America become involved in the Vietnam War and why was it unsuccessful in its conduct of the war? They focus on the political failures of President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime but ignore its military success. This thesis seeks to examine the battles fought by ARVN from 1962 to 1963 to determine if it was successfully defeating the Viet Cong on the battlefield. It will argue that by November, 1963, ARVN was winning the vast majority of engagements

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<sup>3</sup> Ly Tong Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua* (Westminster, CA: Tu-Quynh, n.d.), 59.

with the Viet Cong and that – at least militarily – it was making significant progress toward accomplishing its strategic objectives. Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung reports, “the objectives were survival and independence. In every political situation these remained the two most important objectives of the South.”<sup>4</sup> As a result of ARVN’s victories over the Viet Cong in 1962 and 1963, survival and independence for South Vietnam seemed within reach.

This thesis examines ARVN military success at both the tactical and strategic levels of war. Tactical success – that is victory in battle – is defined as accomplishing the objective of a given operation. Strategic success is defined as ARVN’s ability to implement and effectively execute its official strategy for 1963: the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam. Judging ARVN’s success at both levels based on its ability to achieve its stated goals gives us a concrete method of measuring success. Whether or not further success could have led to victory is impossible to know. However, ARVN’s tactical and strategic success in 1962 and 1963 suggests that South Vietnam’s ultimate defeat in 1975 was far from inevitable.

The history of the Vietnam War is widely studied in the United States of America, but much of the historical research and popular attention has focused on the period after 1965 when U.S. forces arrived in the country. The time before U.S. intervention is underrepresented in the field because it was primarily a Vietnamese conflict and American historians have preferred to focus on the period of American involvement. The historiography of the Vietnam War is divided into two main schools of thought: orthodox and revisionist. The orthodox school argues that the Diem regime was fundamentally

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<sup>4</sup> Hoang Ngoc Lung, *Strategy and Tactics* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980), 6.

flawed, the Viet Cong were winning, and the war against the communists was doomed to fail. The revisionist school argues that Diem's regime was successfully winning the war and that America's decision to support a coup against him threw away a chance at victory. Regardless of their various positions, all sides agree on the importance of understanding the Diem regime, a point with which this thesis agrees. Unfortunately, this focus on Diem and the political situation in South Vietnam ignores the military successes of ARVN in the field leading to an incomplete understanding of the war. By shifting the focus to ARVN's military engagements with the Viet Cong, a more positive view of the war in 1962-1963 emerges.

The foundational works of the orthodox view of the war in South Vietnam during the early 1960s were primarily written by journalists. First among these is David Halberstam's 1965 book *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era*.<sup>5</sup> Halberstam argued that ARVN was not capable of winning the Vietnam War. He uses the battle of Ap Bac as a typical example of the South's performance in combat. Despite having helicopters, artillery, and napalm ARVN was unable to defeat a smaller, poorly-armed Viet Cong force in the village of Ap Bac. He also argued that the leadership of Diem was discriminatory against South Vietnam's majority Buddhist population, causing Diem to lose the support of the South Vietnamese people to the Viet Cong. The only chance America still had to win was to remove Diem from power. Halberstam's work helped create a negative view of ARVN military performance long before the war ended that ingrained itself into the American memory of the war and went

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<sup>5</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

unchallenged for decades. His portrayal of ARVN based primarily on the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division stationed in the Mekong Delta is not representative of ARVN's performance as a whole, as this thesis will prove by examining ARVN units stationed around the country.

This portrayal of South Vietnam during the early stages of the Vietnam War was furthered by Frances Fitzgerald's Pulitzer Prize winning *Fire in the Lake*.<sup>6</sup> It is the classic account of the war in Vietnam prior to the entry of U.S. ground troops. She, like Halberstam, contends that Diem's authoritarian policies lost the support of the people and once the Viet Cong gained their support, it became impossible for the South to win the war. Fitzgerald also points out that America was naive in its handling of the war because it did not understand the culture of the Vietnamese people and was therefore unable to come up with effective solutions for the unique nature of the Vietnamese conflict. Fitzgerald by focusing so heavily on the political side of the conflict, fails to recognize the importance of the military situation in South Vietnam during the Diem regime - which is essential to understanding the war at the time.

Another classic on the early war is the Pulitzer Prize winning work of Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*.<sup>7</sup> The book is a biography of John Paul Vann. Sheehan argues that ARVN was losing the war by looking at the same battle as Halberstam, Ap Bac, where Vann served as an adviser to the ARVN 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Sheehan agrees with Halberstam's characterization of the battle. He also supports Vann's argument that American strategy was too focused on fighting conventional battles instead of carrying out counterinsurgency to win the hearts and

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Little, Brown and Company, 1972)

<sup>7</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

minds of the Vietnamese people which Vann believed was necessary to win the war. Sheehan, by focusing on the experiences of Vann, is limited by Vann's perspective, leading to an incomplete understanding of the war which does not account for the successes of ARVN units in battles in which Vann did not participate. By examining a wider variety of ARVN forces, including the Vietnamese Marines and ARVN divisions outside of the Mekong Delta, this thesis will show that ARVN was winning the war against the Viet Cong.

These award-winning works established a negative view of South Vietnamese military performance in the popular understanding of the Vietnam War. For a long time, their conclusions were not challenged, as attention shifted to the American phase of the war. Only in the 1990s, once government records were declassified and the history of American involvement became oversaturated, did historians begin looking at the start of the Vietnam War. Many of the journalist's conclusions were questioned and some even overturned.

Mark Moyer may be the great iconoclast of Vietnam War historiography. He challenges every conclusion made by the orthodox school, including that the war was not winnable. He goes so far as to assert that the war was being won when America threw away its chance of victory by encouraging the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 in his aptly titled book, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-65*.<sup>8</sup> In it, Moyer argues that ARVN was defeating the Viet Cong in 1962-63. He challenges Halberstam and Sheehan's portrayal of ARVN performance at the battle of Ap Bac.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-65* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Moyar blames John Paul Vann's poor choice of a landing zone for the defeat and asserts that the South's actions in the battle, like refusing to advance over an open rice paddy under machine gun fire, were rational reactions to the circumstances. Moyar was one of the first historians to focus on ARVN's military performance, but he touches on it only briefly outside of Ap Bac. This thesis will further examine ARVN's battles against the Viet Cong to arrive at a more complete understanding of the war in 1962-1963.

Another work that challenges many of the conclusions of the orthodox view, without going as far as Moyar, is Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, which is a study of the Presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem.<sup>9</sup> Miller completely overturns the view of Diem as an American puppet. He argues that Diem pursued his own vision of Vietnamese nationalism that was very different from the visions of American and North Vietnamese leaders. Miller does not shy away from the authoritarian nature of Diem's regime, which caused Diem to lose American. However, unlike Moyar, Miller argues that Diem would have been unable to win the war because he lost the support of the Vietnamese people. Miller is part of a growing group of historians of the Vietnam War who have learned Vietnamese and focus more on the Vietnamese perspective of the war. However, he still fails to recognize the significance of ARVN's military successes.

Another historian who focuses on the South Vietnamese experience of the war and who learned Vietnamese is Philip Catton. His work *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to*

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

*America's War in Vietnam*, falls more solidly into the orthodox school than Miller.<sup>10</sup>

Catton argues that the Diem regime's strategy to win the war, the Strategic Hamlet Program, was a failure. Due to pressure for quick results from President Diem, the Republic of Vietnam built the hamlets too quickly for the construction of proper fortifications, causing them to be easily overrun by the Viet Cong. Like many other orthodox historians, Catton argues that Diem lost the support of the people and therefore could not have won the war. This focus on the strategic hamlets misses important nature of events on the battlefield which are key to understanding the war near the end of the Diem regime.

ARVN Colonel Ha Mai Viet wrote a revisionist history of ARVN's Armored branch called *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia*.<sup>11</sup> ARVN armor units were well trained and fought in many of the major battles of the war. Viet's book is not a memoir, unlike many of the works written by former South Vietnamese officers, but it is one of first works to recognize the importance of ARVN in fighting the war. Viet argues that America abandoned South Vietnam, which led to its defeat by the North in 1975. He contends that with continued American support, ARVN could have successfully defended the South from the North's invasion. He also disagrees with Halberstam and Sheehan's depiction of ARVN military performance during the early stages of the war by providing details about battles that ARVN won during this

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Ha Mai Viet, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008).



period. Viet points out that the South Vietnamese saw Ap Bac as a minor battle and felt that the Americans had given it far greater significance than it warranted.

One work that does not neatly fit into the two schools of Vietnam War historiography is Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*.<sup>12</sup> It is the standard history of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, influenced by the arguments of Fitzgerald and Moyar. Wiest traces the history of ARVN through the lives of two of its most successful soldiers: Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue. He argues that ARVN was created in the image of the United States military as a largely conventional force that relied on firepower and technology to give it the edge on the battlefield. South Vietnam was not able to sustain this kind of military, which was far too expensive for a country as small as South Vietnam. Furthermore, this type of military was not suited to the hybrid war being fought in Vietnam which required greater counterinsurgency capabilities. Wiest also argued that the leadership of ARVN was poor for most of the war, making victory nearly impossible. Better leaders like Pham and Tran were rising through the ranks but were not able to reach the upper echelons of command before the South fell. Despite being one of the few books that recognizes the importance of ARVN in telling the history of the Vietnam War, it is primarily focused on the period after 1965, but it will enable this thesis to place ARVN's performance in the early 1960s within the broader context of the war.

The significance of ARVN's military performance in the early 1960s has been marginalized by an overwhelming focus on political aspects of the conflict at that time. A

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

narrower look at the war effort that incorporates South Vietnamese sources would provide a more complex understanding of the war. This thesis is part of a growing scholarship on the history of ARVN and the wartime experiences of South Vietnam. Previous studies of the war from 1962-1963 have failed to understand the importance of ARVN's military successes and to listen to the voices of South Vietnam's soldiers both of which are necessary to understanding the Vietnam War.

Among the primary sources that cover ARVN's military performance in the Vietnam War from 1962-63, the records stored in National Archives Record Group 472 are the most important.<sup>13</sup> RG 472 contains reports on ARVN combat operations during this period from the records of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and which was tasked with advising ARVN in the field. The records include daily journals, combat after action reports, and Operational Reports - Lessons Learned (ORLL). These sources will be used to form an account of the military actions that were conducted by ARVN and to determine how ARVN performed in combat against the Viet Cong. The U.S. Army's reports on the progress of the war in Vietnam were notoriously optimistic and potentially covered up flaws in ARVN's performance in order to portray the U.S. advisory effort as successful to the Kennedy administration. However, the lower level combat reports that this thesis relies on generally avoid this shortcoming because they focused on the minutia of tactical details and were not intended to demonstrate success to the administration, which freed them from much of the impetus for optimism. They also suggest that the Army's optimism was closer to reality than previously believed.

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<sup>13</sup> National Archives, Records Group 472 (Maryland).

Another useful collection of military records is contained in the Library of Congress' Neil Sheehan collection in Washington, D. C.<sup>14</sup> It contains copies of reports and journals made by John Paul Vann, Richard Ziegler, and other Americans during their time as advisors to the ARVN 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Some of the reports contained in the collection no longer exist in the records held by the National Archives. They help construct a more accurate picture of ARVN operations in the vital Mekong Delta region where the 7<sup>th</sup> Division was stationed. However, these papers have difficulties beyond those encountered with other reports. Vann mislead fellow advisors and journalists about leading combat troops in Korea and the fact that he had been charged with sexual assault. These revelations change our understanding of Vann's motivations and suggests that information originating from Vann should be vigorously scrutinized.

The United States Air Force also had advisors in South Vietnam who produced mandatory reports on combat actions. The Air Force produced Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations (CHECO) reports on major issues of the Vietnam War.<sup>15</sup> They contain a brief historical summary of the period plus many supplementary documents attached to the end of the report. These reports primarily concern the air missions undertaken in support of ARVN ground operations, but they usually include a brief narrative of the ground operations as well. The Air Force's official history of their advisory effort *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* provides greater detail on ARVN's military operations and

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<sup>14</sup> Neil Sheehan Collection, After Action Reports (Washington: Library of Congress).

<sup>15</sup> Donald Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report #61 - Part V - Air Operations - October 1961 to December 1963* (Washington: Air Force, 1964).

highlights the importance of air power to the war effort.<sup>16</sup> These Air Force records offer a valuable contrast to the Army perspective on events in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, ARVN's own official reports were captured by the North Vietnamese at the end of the Vietnam War and are difficult for historians to access. However, exiled ARVN soldiers in the United States have endeavored to tell their stories in self-published memoirs. Huynh Van Cao was one of ARVN's highest-ranking officers during this period, commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps Tactical Zone and at one point he was advised by Vann. In America he wrote *Mot Kiep Nguoi* about his experience in the war.<sup>17</sup> It contains accounts of battles that happened under his command as well as his interpretation of these events and their importance in the Vietnam War. Ly Tong Ba was a company commander in 1963 but by the end of the war he rose to the rank of brigadier general. *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua* is his memoir of the war and deals extensively with his service at the head of a mechanized infantry company.<sup>18</sup> He gives detailed accounts of battles as well a look at the problems faced by Vietnamese officers who had to deal with American advisors and press unfamiliar with the complexities of Vietnam. Another key memoir is *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars* by Nguyen Cong Luan, who was a staff officer in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division during this period.<sup>19</sup> He provides invaluable information on the state of the war in the Central Highland provinces where he served.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Huynh Van Cao, *Mot Kiep Nguoi* (Chantilly, VA: self-published, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Ly Tong Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua* (Westminster, CA: Tu-Quynh, n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen Cong Luan, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

The Indochina monographs, a series of studies written by former ARVN officers for the U.S. Army after the war, are an important source on numerous aspects of the ARVN war effort from strategy to leadership to advisor relationships.<sup>20</sup> They provide especially useful information on how ARVN was organized and on its strategic objectives throughout the war. *The Vietnamese Marine Corps' Twenty-One Years of Warfare (1954-1975)*, Volume 2 is a book published privately by the Vietnamese Marine Corps Association.<sup>21</sup> It is a collection of highly detailed vignettes written by Vietnamese Marine officers recounting the Marines major battles. However, South Vietnamese sources are not without their own flaws. The Southerners dedication to their country might cause them to paper over some of its flaws that led to its downfall, but these sources must be used because they are the best way to get at the experiences of ARVN officers from their own perspective, which is valuable in understanding the Vietnam War.

Getting the other side's perspective is also essential to understanding the war. North Vietnam's military archives are completely closed to westerners, but the North Vietnamese government has published many official histories, which are the best sources on the communists available to those in the west who study the Vietnam War. The main official history is *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of*

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<sup>20</sup> Cao Van Vien, *Leadership* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980); Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980); Cao Van Vien, Ngo Quang Truong, Dong Van Khuyen, Nguyen Duy Hinh, Tran Dinh Tho, Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Chu Xuan Vien *The U.S. Adviser* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980); Dong Van Khuyen, *The RVNAF* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980); Hoang Ngoc Lung, *Strategy and Tactics* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980); Ngo Quang Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1984); and Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association in the United States, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps' Twenty-One Years of Warfare (1954-1975)*, Volume 2 (Santa Ana, CA: Vietnamese Marine Association in the United States, 2005).

*Vietnam 1954-1975*.<sup>22</sup> There is also the new multi-volume series *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954-1975* which goes into far greater detail on communist operations during the war.<sup>23</sup> The North Vietnamese divided South Vietnam into many military regions and histories have been written on most of them.<sup>24</sup> However communist histories have serious flaws since they are intended as propaganda in which failings and troubles are rarely, if ever, mentioned. When they are mentioned, it is generally a sign that the problem must have been big enough to be impossible to gloss over. The communists often claim to have killed more American or South Vietnamese soldiers than were even present at any given battle. Furthermore, the communist histories are full of propagandistic rhetoric. America is almost always referred to as ‘imperialist’ and South Vietnam is identified as a ‘puppet’ government at every opportunity. However, by reading past the bias and propaganda, one can find kernels of useful information.

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<sup>22</sup> The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam 1954-1975* (United States: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954-1975* (Hanoi: Military History Institute of Vietnam, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Council for Drafting the History of Southern Central Vietnam's Resistance War, *Southern Central Vietnam's War of Resistance, 1945-1975* (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House, 1995); Kieu Tam Nguyen, *The Tri-Thien-Hue Theater during the Victorious War of Resistance and National Salvation Against America (a draft)* (Hue, Vietnam: Thuan Hoa Publishers, 1985); Military Region 5 Headquarters and Party Committee, *Military Region 5: Victories and Lessons Learned During the Resistance War Against The Americans, Volume I (Internal Distribution Only)* (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 1981); Military Region 7 Headquarters and Party Committee, *The Resistance War in Eastern Cochinchina (1945-1975), Volume I* (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 1993); Military Region 8 Headquarters and Party Committee, *Military Region 8: Thirty Years of Resistance War (1945-1975)*, (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 1998); Military Region 9 Headquarters and Party Committee, *Military Region 9: 30 Years of Resistance (1945-1975)* (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 1996); and Tran Duong, *History of Military Region 6 (Extreme Southern Central Vietnam and the Southern Central Highlands) during the Resistance War Against the Americans, 1954-1975* (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 1995).

At Texas Tech's Vietnam Virtual Archives, the Nulsen Collection contains the records of an advisor to a company of ARVN Rangers, an elite group of light infantry who were some of the most effective ARVN units of the war.<sup>25</sup> It includes reports on their operations, as well as a retrospective piece that asserts Nulsen's view that the war was going well. Since few accounts of ARVN Ranger operations have been included in previous works on the period, this collection allows for a more detailed look at how the best of South Vietnam's soldiers fared in the fight against the Viet Cong.

At the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, the James C. Thomson Personal Papers contains valuable documents relating to the coup against President Diem and American strategy in Vietnam. The *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes on the Kennedy Administration's Vietnam policy are an invaluable source for understanding America's relations with South Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> These records allow this thesis to evaluate whether the administration's view of events matched the situation on the ground, and the implications that may have had on the course of the Vietnam War.

The last major primary source is the news reports on combat published at the time. Neil Sheehan's reporting for the United Press Institute is vital, as is the work of David Halberstam for the *New York Times*. The work of Peter Arnett and Malcom Browne for the Associated Press are also important.<sup>27</sup> These young reporters on

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<sup>25</sup> Nulsen Collection, Vietnam Virtual Archive, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/resources/194>.

<sup>26</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. II, Vietnam, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990); Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991); and Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> *New York Times*, (New York, 1962-63); *Washington Post*, (Washington, D.C. 1962-63).

assignment in South Vietnam were talented, yet inexperienced. However, several more experienced news people did publish reports from this period. Richard Tregaskis was the only American who landed with the Marines on Guadalcanal during World War II and was a legendary war correspondent. He visited Vietnam during late 1962 and early 1963 and published *Vietnam Diary* which contains reports on numerous battles and the opinion of a seasoned war correspondent, which will help temper the inexperienced observations of the other reporters.<sup>28</sup>

These news reports contain ‘who, what, when, where, and why’ details about many of the major battles that happened in South Vietnam during the early stages of the war. As soon as reporters heard of a big fight, they tried to get out to the battlefield and get interviews with U.S. personnel. However, these reports have problems of their own. Sheehan and Halberstam were both heavily influenced by John Paul Vann and often accepted his accounts uncritically, so their work needs to be looked at carefully. If Army reports were potentially over-optimistic, many of the news reports are overly pessimistic portraying the war effort as a failing enterprise. As such, the news reports serve as good contrasts with the U.S. Army reports to try to accurately triangulate the outcome of battles.

Each primary source has problems, flaws, and biases that makes relying on any one of them problematic. However, by cross-referencing these sources against each other, this thesis can overcome these limitations. Potentially inaccurate information can be checked against other sources to produce a more reliable account of an operation. Biased

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963).



accounts can be checked against accounts that are not affected by the same biases in order to discern their accuracy. These documents together allow for the first complete reconstruction of the military situation in Vietnam from 1962 to 1963. Only by understanding the military performance of ARVN at this time can we come to a comprehensive understanding of the Vietnam War.

There is a need for this thesis because of a void in the historiography and sources exist to support an argument to fill this void. This thesis is organized to demonstrate the extent of ARVN military effectiveness from 1962-1963. Chapter 2 challenges the works of Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam regarding ARVN performance at the battle of Ap Bac. They argued that ARVN's fighting in the battle was "a miserable damn performance, just like it always was."<sup>29</sup> The defeat at Ap Bac is seen as representative of ARVN's overall performance in combat. This chapter will argue that ARVN's poor performance at Ap Bac was not solely the result of errors made by ARVN. Bad luck, unfavorable terrain, and mistakes made by their American advisors which have largely gone unrecognized, were all major factors that contributed to ARVN's defeat. A poor operational plan and a lack of air support mollified the advantages that historians claim ARVN had. This chapter relies on four main sources: the U.S. Army's After Action Report on Ap Bac, the U.S. Air Force's Report, the secret communications between the Pacific Command and MACV during the battle, and the Viet Cong's own report on the battle. ARVN's operations in the year before Ap Bac demonstrate that their defeat was not representative of their overall performance.

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<sup>29</sup> Neil Sheehan, "Vietnamese Ignored U.S. Battle Order," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1963.

Chapter 3 goes back to the time before the battle of Ap Bac to demonstrate how ARVN first achieved battlefield success. The Viet Cong insurgency against the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) began in 1960 and achieved limited success by 1961, threatening the survival of the non-communist Southern government. The Kennedy Administration decided to increase the U.S. advisory effort to help ARVN reverse the losing trend. By 1962, the advisory program began to show results, with ARVN attaining several important victories and turning the tide of the war in the South's favor. The introduction of American air support, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers (APCs) gave ARVN significant advantages in mobility and firepower and threw the Viet Cong war effort into disarray. Most of the historiography of the Vietnam War acknowledges the success of the South in 1962, but it is vastly understudied, likely due to the lack of easily accessed sources. Even the National Archives contains only a few sources from the Year of the Tiger, but the ORLLs contain a wealth of valuable information about ARVN combat operations in 1962 and newspaper reports from the period are vital to filling in the gaps in those sources. ARVN's newfound success carried over into 1963 despite an early defeat at Ap Bac and growing political tensions.

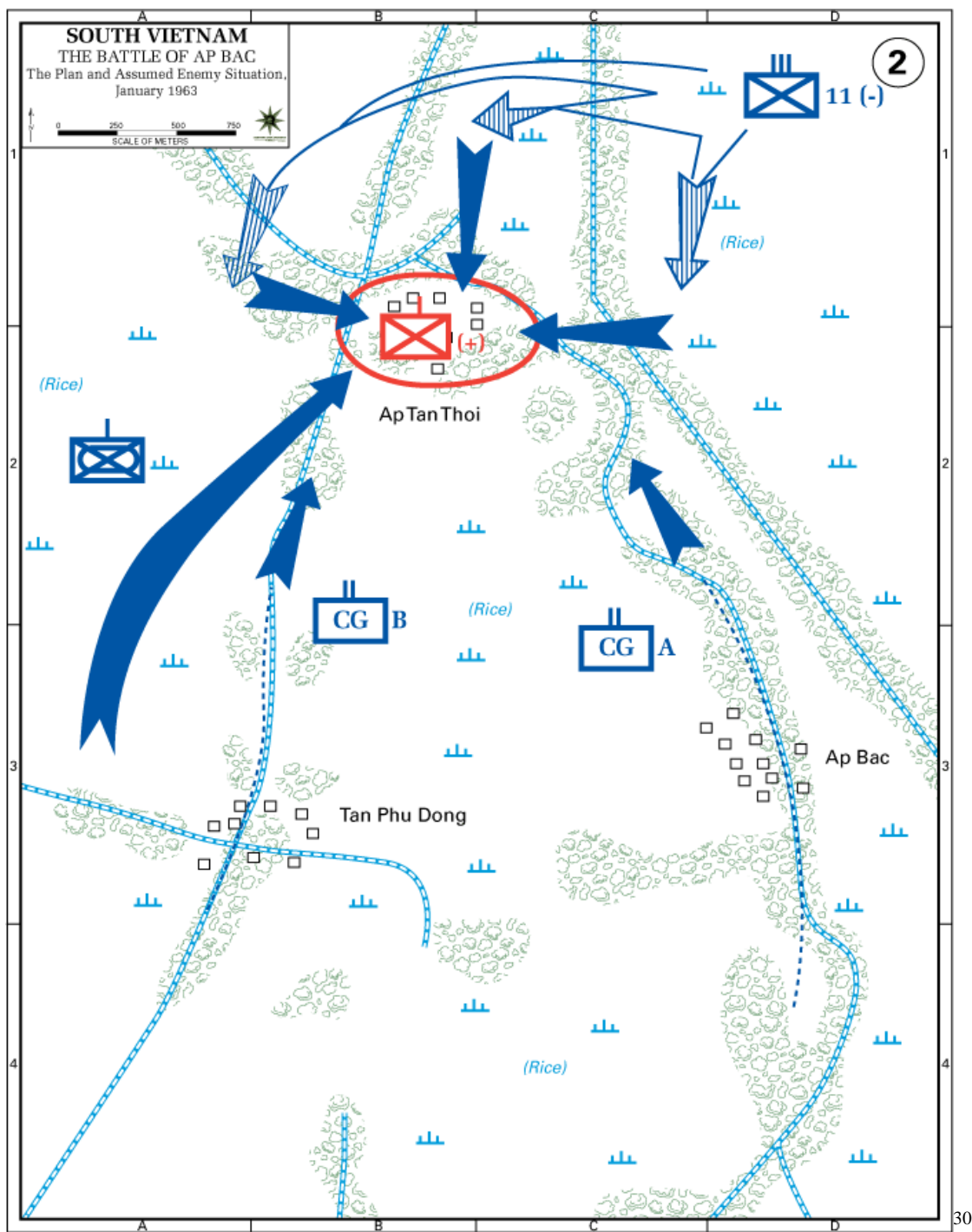
Chapter 4 picks up the story after Ap Bac and argues against Frances Fitzgerald and David Halberstam's portrayal of the war in 1963. They contend that the failures of the Diem regime in the Buddhist protests showed that the regime had lost the support of the people and it was therefore incapable of winning the war. The Diem government's oppression of the Buddhist majority and raids on pagoda's convinced the Kennedy Administration to support a coup against Diem. Meanwhile, ARVN was winning significant military victories against the Viet Cong in insurgent strongholds like the

Mekong Delta and War Zone C. These victories conclusively demonstrate that Ap Bac cannot be considered representative of ARVN's combat performance during the period. The Marines won a battle against a well-defended Viet Cong position in the Ca Mau peninsula at the southern tip of Vietnam that was very similar to Ap Bac. The ARVN Rangers conducted operations in the Viet Cong controlled War Zone C. In July, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division defeated the very same forces who had defeated them at Ap Bac. The records of the U.S. Army in the National Archives, the collections of the Vietnam Virtual Archive, and the history of the Vietnamese Marine Corps contain useful reports on ARVN combat operations in the year of the cat. This chapter proves that the military situation in Vietnam in 1963 was going far better than America's leaders were led to believe.

While most accounts of the November 1, 1963 coup against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem focus on the motivations behind the coup, this thesis ends by arguing that the coup was a well-executed military operation that also demonstrates that ARVN was an effective fighting force. The Kennedy Administration's focus on the political failures of the Diem regime and subsequent decision to remove Diem from power pushed several overly ambitious ARVN commanders into overthrowing the government, leading a victorious military to its own demise. As the new military government began to focus on maintaining power, repeated purges of officers thought to be disloyal to the government decimated ARVN's command, leading to a succession of major defeats at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army. South Vietnam was left on the verge of defeat and the victories of 1962 and 1963 were lost to time. The *Foreign Relations of the United States* documents demonstrate the administration's mistaken view of the situation in Vietnam. The Daily Journal of the MACV operations staff provides an almost minute for minute

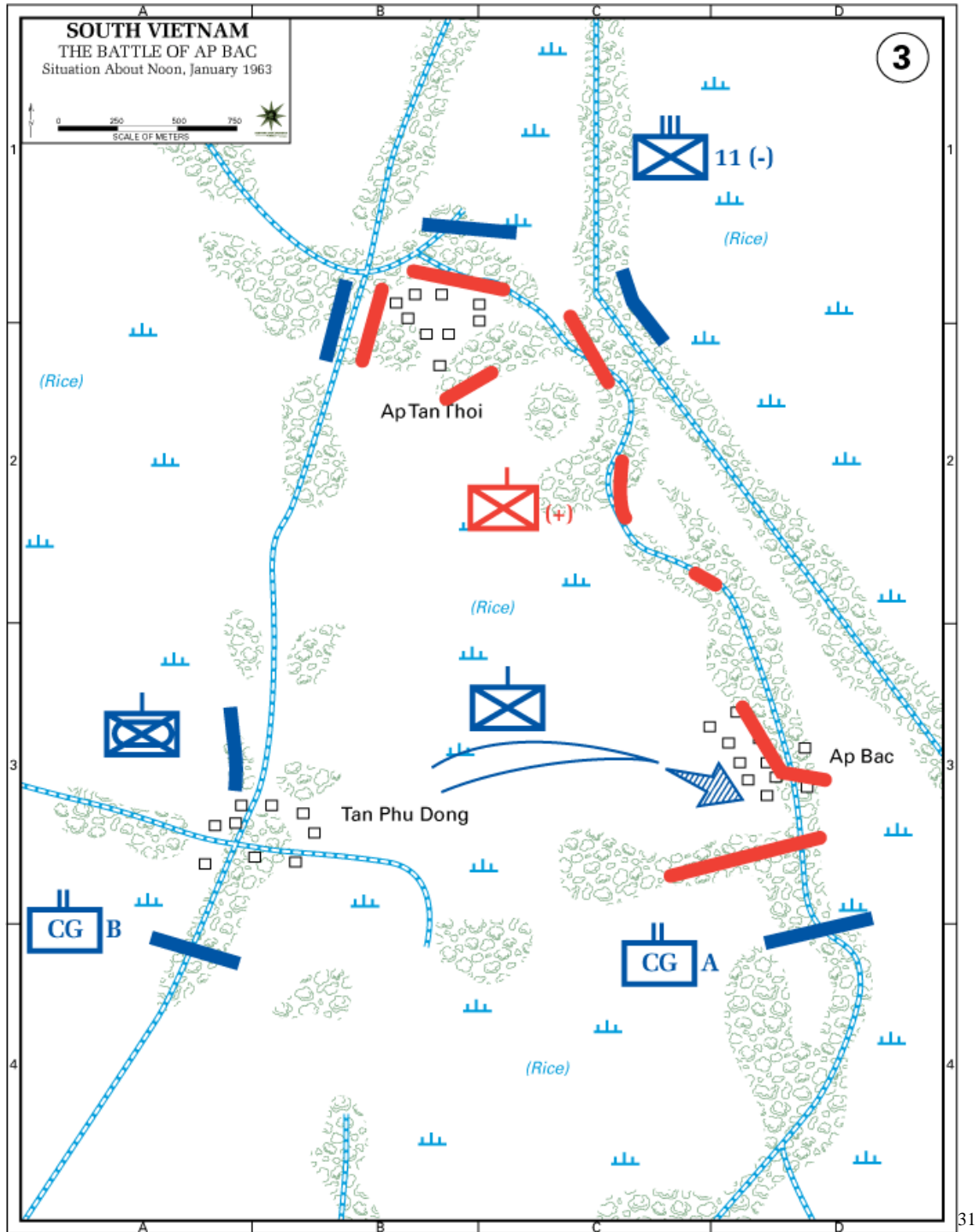
account of the coup and is a key source for this chapter's analysis of the coup. The memoirs of South Vietnamese soldiers reveal the perspectives of the men who led, carried out, and opposed the coup and their conflicted feelings about the operation. Their history, the history of ARVN, needs to be rediscovered because it is fundamental to an accurate understanding of the war in which those men fought and died. ARVN achieved significant success on the battlefield, and, as a result, in 1962 and 1963 South Vietnam, counter to the conventional historiography's view was making considerable progress toward victory in Vietnam.

## The Battle of Ap Bac The Plan and Enemy Situation



<sup>30</sup> United States Military Academy, "The Battle of Ap Bac The Plan and Enemy Situation," Accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/vietnam/Vietnam02.gif>

## The Battle of Ap Bac



<sup>31</sup> United States Military Academy. "The Battle of Ap Bac." Accessed March 24, 2020.  
<https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/vietnam/Vietnam03.gif>

## CHAPTER II – AP BAC REVISITED

The battle of Ap Bac which took place on 2 January 1963 is easily the best-known battle of the early stages of the Vietnam War. On that fateful day, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and their American advisors set out on a simple mission to locate and destroy a suspected Viet Cong radio near Ap Bac.<sup>32</sup> Typically, the Viet Cong avoided fighting ARVN in such situations, but on this occasion, they stood their ground. The battle quickly turned into a fiasco. During the fighting, the guerillas managed to shoot down five American helicopters and hit fourteen out of the total fifteen that were present. Three American advisors were killed, and ARVN's casualties were considerably higher.<sup>33</sup>

The American advisors were quick to blame ARVN for the stunning defeat. Shortly after the battle ended, the senior advisor to the ARVN 7<sup>th</sup> Division, Colonel John Paul Vann, summed up his view of ARVN's conduct during the battle to several reporters. He called it "a miserable damn performance."<sup>34</sup> In the Army's official report on the battle, the head advisor to the ARVN IV Corps, Colonel Daniel Porter, placed all the blame for the defeat on ARVN.<sup>35</sup> In national newspapers, U.S. advisors claimed ARVN soldiers showed a "lack of aggressiveness" and that they had purposely disobeyed direct orders.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Senior Advisor, 7th Infantry Division, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963" (Saigon: MACV, 1963), 34,

<sup>33</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietcong Down Five U.S. Copters, Hits Nine Others," *New York Times*, January 3, 1963.

<sup>34</sup> Neil Sheehan, "Vietnamese Ignored U.S. Battle Order," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1963.

<sup>35</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 32.

<sup>36</sup> Sheehan, "Vietnamese Ignored."

The advisors even claimed that one of the dead Americans had been killed while “pleading with them [ARVN troops] to attack.”<sup>37</sup> This claim is not supported by the evidence. Two of the dead Americans were pilots who were killed when their helicopters were shot down.<sup>38</sup> So, the reference must have been to the third fatality, Captain Kenneth Good, the only one who was with ARVN during the battle. However, he did not die until after he had been evacuated from the battlefield and none of the advisors saw him get wounded, only learning of his injuries hours after the fact.<sup>39</sup> That the advisors became so vitriolic in placing the blame on ARVN, to the point of making up shameful stories, is understandable considering the stresses of war and death, and the crushing disappointment of losing a battle.<sup>40</sup> It is only natural to be upset and vindictive in such a charged moment. Unfortunately, their fictitious claim went unchallenged for far too long.

Likewise, their larger conclusions about the battle have gone unchallenged for too long. Both of the most famous published accounts of the battle of Ap Bac – David Halberstam’s *The Making of a Quagmire* and Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie* – are based largely on the conclusions of Col. Vann and the other U.S. advisors. This chapter will challenge their claim that ARVN alone was at fault for the debacle at Ap Bac. While ARVN was indeed responsible for some of the mistakes that led to the defeat, they were

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<sup>37</sup> Sheehan, “Vietnamese Ignored.”

<sup>38</sup> Senior Advisor, “After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963,” 72.

<sup>39</sup> Senior Advisor, “After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963,” 68.

<sup>40</sup> Whether Ap Bac should be considered a defeat or a victory has been a point of contention for a long time. Col. Vann argued that it was a defeat because of the large number of casualties and the failure to destroy the Viet Cong. Gen. Paul Harkins, the commander of American forces in Vietnam, argued that it was a victory because ARVN successfully took the Viet Cong position the next day. This thesis considers it a defeat in the sense that the battle did not accomplish its objective of destroying the Viet Cong radio. No radio was found in Ap Bac when ARVN took the hamlet. Whether the Viet Cong took the radio with them when they withdrew or never had a radio at Ap Bac is unknown. Senior Advisor, “After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963,” 41.



not the only source of failure that day. The Battle of Ap Bac was also lost because of largely unrecognized mistakes made by their American advisors, hard fighting by the Viet Cong, bad luck, and poor terrain which made it nearly impossible for ARVN to successfully attack the enemy.

The lack of training received by Vietnamese soldiers was the first factor that contributed to ARVN's failure at Ap Bac. Only three percent of ARVN's time was spent in training. Another thirteen percent was spent in combat with most of their remaining and the vast majority of their resting.<sup>41</sup> ARVN officers believed that combat experience would make up for their lack of training. However, as Vann noted in his after action report, combat experience cannot replace proper training. He wrote that the kind of "immediate, correct reaction" needed in combat is not "instinctual" and that it happens "only as the result of long and repetitive training."<sup>42</sup> He also pointed out that more training was necessary if ARVN wanted to win future battles.<sup>43</sup> As a result of these training failures, some of the ARVN troops who fought that day did not respond with enough skill to achieve victory. Both the Vietnamese and Americans must share the blame for this failure in preparation. The Vietnamese Army did have a responsibility to train itself, but the American advisors were in Vietnam specifically to train the ARVN. Lapses in training were in part America's responsibility.

Faulty intelligence was another contributing factor to the defeat at Ap Bac. Between December 28, 1962 and January 1, 1963, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division received reports that

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<sup>41</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 5.

<sup>42</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 14.

<sup>43</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 14.

there was a radio station located in the hamlet of Tan Thoi. The intelligence also indicated that it was guarded by a single reinforced company.<sup>44</sup> The intelligence about the Viet Cong's strength was incorrect. The Viet Cong had two companies around Ap Bac and a significant number of guerrilla units were also there to provide assistance.<sup>45</sup> After the battle, Viet Cong troop strength was estimated at 350 to 400 men.<sup>46</sup> For reference, U.S. Army companies generally had an active strength of 164 men during the war.<sup>47</sup> The intelligence reports underestimated the strength of enemy forces by more than half. As a result, the plan for Ap Bac was based on faulty intelligence.<sup>48</sup> This caused it to be poorly suited to conditions on the ground when the battle started.

While both Americans and Vietnamese contributed to the plan, the planning was dominated by American Captain Richard Ziegler.<sup>49</sup> His plan was simple. The South Vietnamese forces would attack Tan Thoi from two sides. In the north, the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment 7th Division would land by helicopter not far from the objective. Concurrently two task forces, labelled 'A' and 'B' of Civil Guard troops – a District level South Vietnamese militia – would advance on foot from the south, with support from a mechanized infantry company made up of thirteen M113 Armored Personnel Carriers. The 1<sup>st</sup> Company, 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 34.

<sup>45</sup> United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Ap Bac Battle, 2 January 1963*; *Translation of VC Document, 20 April 1963*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ha Mai Viet, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Shelby Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*, (United States: Presidio Press, 1985), 369.

<sup>48</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 35.

<sup>49</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 204.

Battalion of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment would be held in reserve along with the 352<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company.<sup>50</sup>

However, Ziegler's plan had two major flaws. First, the attacks were not coordinated so that the different elements would reach the objective at the same time. The first troops of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment landed at 0703.<sup>51</sup> The mechanized company did not begin moving until 0630 and it was still several hours from the original objective when it was diverted to rescue the downed helicopters.<sup>52</sup> This piecemeal delivery of troops to battlefield allowed the Viet Cong the opportunity to defeat the ARVN in detail – an opportunity they were happy to take. The Viet Cong defenders never faced more than one of the separate elements of the attacking force at a time. As a result, the American plan effectively nullified ARVN's numerical advantage against the Viet Cong.

Another flaw in the plan was that it did not create a unified command to control the battle. The units of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment were under the command of 7<sup>th</sup> Division commander Col. Dam, but the mechanized company and Civil Guard units were under the local sector commander, Major Tho.<sup>53</sup> At least once in the battle, this led to conflicting orders. Task Force A received orders from Dam to attack while from Tho, they were ordered to hold a blocking position. The Task Force Commander obeyed his direct commander Tho instead of Dam, leading to a missed opportunity to flank the Viet Cong.<sup>54</sup> This is the fault of both the Vietnamese for their overcomplicated multiple,

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<sup>50</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 34, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 35.

<sup>52</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 62.

<sup>53</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 24.

<sup>54</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 59.

overlapping commands and of the Americans for making a plan that did not have a single commander who alone gave orders for the whole operation.

The Americans were also to blame for another flaw in the plan. They gave a major role in the fighting to the Civil Guard units, despite their own poor appraisal of Civil Guard's utility. Col. Vann admitted after the battle that regular ARVN units were much better than the Civil Guard at conducting offensive operations and that Civil Guard units should only be used for security operations.<sup>55</sup> However, the plan chose to use them offensively anyway. As a result, ARVN had less effective combat power at Ap Bac than their numbers suggest on paper. These flaws in Ziegler's plan allowed the Viet Cong to fight a divided force of uneven quality piecemeal, giving the communists a great advantage in the fight.

The Americans alone were responsible for may have been the key factor in ARVN's defeat: the lack of air support at the start of the battle. On the same day as Ap Bac, ARVN fought another battle at Tay Ninh involving some 1,250 paratroopers.<sup>56</sup> The operation in Tay Ninh was so important that the ARVN Joint General Staff ordered the Vietnamese-American Joint Operations Center (JOC), which controlled every fighter and bomber in South Vietnam, to devote all of the air power in the country to support the paratroopers.<sup>57</sup> On 31 December, the Air Force air liaison officer to the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, Major Herbert Prevost, presented a request to JOC for fighters to provide escort for the helicopters making the landings and close air support for the troops on the ground at Ap

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<sup>55</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 9.

<sup>56</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 366.

<sup>57</sup> Donald Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report #61 - Part V - Air Operations - October 1961 to December 1963* (Washington: Air Force, 1964), 29, 31.

Bac.<sup>58</sup> He was informed that all JOC's resources were being diverted to the Tay Ninh operation and there would be no air support available. The next day Prevost asked JOC again whether any air support would be available and was told no. JOC had the impression that the 7<sup>th</sup> Division operation had been postponed.<sup>59</sup>

Unable to secure air support, the Americans decided to use an UH-1B and four HU-1A Huey attack helicopters to support the landings, but their rocket attacks and strafing runs proved ineffective against the Viet Cong fortifications.<sup>60</sup> With the situation rapidly deteriorating, the ARVN forces at Ap Bac were without effective air support until an emergency request for fighter or bomber support was put in at 1005.<sup>61</sup> This was just fifteen minutes before the Viet Cong shot down the first helicopters.<sup>62</sup> In response to the request, JOC diverted old, propeller-driven AD-6 Skyraiders and B-26 Marauders to strafe the Viet Cong, and drop their ordinance left over from Tay Ninh.<sup>63</sup> This air support was ineffective, often landing in the enemy's rear and never hitting their machine gun positions or fortifications.<sup>64</sup> ARVN did not receive air support with enough firepower to do any damage to the Viet Cong's defenses until 1540, when a B-26 arrived with napalm for the first time in the battle. Under the guidance of Prevost, the bomber managed to

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<sup>58</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 25.

<sup>59</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years To 1965* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1981), 158. Although the Huey helicopter is most well-known for its role in transportation, during the early years of the Vietnam War it was primarily used as a gunship, while the H-21 inhabited the role for which the Huey later became famous.

<sup>61</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 36.

<sup>63</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 36; Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report*, 30.

<sup>64</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 15, 17.

knock out one of the Viet Cong machine gun positions.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, this occurred several hours after most of the fighting in the battle had ended, far too late to be useful.

Air support was crucial to ARVN's success in battle. It gave them an overwhelming advantage in firepower, which often proved enough to swing the outcome of a battle in their favor. The Air Force made up less than three percent of the total forces in Vietnam but accounted for 38 percent of the Viet Cong killed in action. Furthermore, the Air Force was responsible for killing 20 times more Viet Cong than the other services on a per capita basis.<sup>66</sup> By failing to get proper air support for the battle, the Americans made an already difficult operation even more challenging. It allowed the Viet Cong to match ARVN in firepower for most of the fighting, undercutting what had been a key ARVN advantage.

The commander in charge of all the American forces in Vietnam, Admiral Harry D. Felt, stationed at the United States Pacific Command Headquarters in Camp Smith, Hawaii, placed blame for the defeat at Ap Bac squarely on the American advisors' decision to carry out the operation without air support. He wrote in a secret cable to the American military headquarters in Vietnam that the advisors had "ignored the fundamentals of warfare by conducting an operation of this kind without adequately preparing the landing area (with air support)."<sup>67</sup> He also wrote, "[I] cannot understand how decision could have been made to conduct an important operation when all available

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<sup>65</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 158; Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 26.

<sup>66</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> CINCPAC to MACV, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 - 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

air support had been allocated to another operation.”<sup>68</sup> Admiral Felt’s statements reveal what high ranking American commanders believed was the cause of the debacle at Ap Bac. The failure to procure adequate air support was a major contributor to ARVN’s defeat that has gone unrecognized for too long.

For the Viet Cong, the period of preparation before the battle went much better, contributing to their victory. In contrast to the Americans and Southerners, their intelligence was impeccable because they had a traitor on the staff of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>69</sup> They knew that ARVN was coming and were able to prepare their defenses beforehand. At 2200 the night before the battle the two companies from the 261<sup>st</sup> and 514<sup>th</sup> Battalions at Ap Bac completed their defenses.<sup>70</sup> The Viet Cong dug in at the dikes on the edges of the hamlets that led into the rice paddies. This gave them an incredible, unobstructed view of the enemy advance. This positioning also prevented the enemy from getting a good view of them due to the dense foliage that covered the dikes.<sup>71</sup> As a result, the ARVN troops were unable to see where the enemy fire was coming from in order to fire back.<sup>72</sup> The Viet Cong foot soldiers dug deep foxholes that protected them from enemy bombs and rockets, as well as from most small arms fire. They also set up their machine guns in such a way that when the ARVN reserves landed by helicopter, they were caught in a crossfire.<sup>73</sup> The Viet Cong defenses literally put them in a good position to win.

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<sup>68</sup> CINCPAC to MACV, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 – 1963.

<sup>69</sup> Huynh Van Cao, *Mot Kiep Nguoi* (Chantilly, VA: self-published, 1993), 80.

<sup>70</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 10, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 210.

<sup>72</sup> Senior Advisor, “After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963,” 63, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 210.

ARVN soon discovered that it was very difficult to dislodge the Viet Cong from these fortifications.

The Viet Cong were also prepared for the helicopter attacks. They recognized the weaknesses of enemy helicopters: low speed, big target, thin armor, complicated engine, and delicate rotor.<sup>74</sup> The Viet Cong realized that if a helicopter could be hit, it could be destroyed. To hit a helicopter, they would need to lead it, that is to shoot in front of the helicopter as it flies so that the bullet runs into the flight path of the chopper. They estimated a general lead of 2/3 the length of the fuselage was necessary to land a hit on a moving chopper.<sup>75</sup> This training proved to be very effective once the battle started. Thus, when the ARVN attack came, the Viet Cong were ready and waiting secure in their defenses and prepared to shoot down enemy choppers. Their quality preparations proved to be major factors in their victory and ARVN's defeat.

At 0530 in the morning, the Viet Cong identified a reconnaissance plane surveying the battlefield and readied themselves for the coming confrontation.<sup>76</sup> The first wave of troops from 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment landed north of Ap Tan Thoi at 0703. However, fog prevented ARVN from continuing the landings for nearly two more hours, allowing the Viet Cong plenty of time to prepare. The rest of the ARVN battalion did not arrive at the landing zone until 0935.<sup>77</sup> They experienced little contact, taking only a couple of rounds of enemy fire.<sup>78</sup> The fog may not have been the biggest cause of

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<sup>74</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 42.

<sup>75</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 43.

<sup>76</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 35.

<sup>78</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 68.



ARVN's defeat at Ap Bac, but it was the beginning of a string of bad luck which played a much larger role in ARVN's failure. While the fog was delaying the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's regular units from attacking the enemy, the Civil Guard got involved in a firefight with the Viet Cong, kicking off the complex series of events that ended in disaster.

Task Force A consisted of the 174<sup>th</sup>, 842<sup>nd</sup>, and 892<sup>nd</sup> Civil Guard companies making it equivalent in size to a battalion. Under the command of Captain Tri, the Task Force moved toward the objective with the 842<sup>nd</sup> Company in the lead. Initially, they moved in single file, but their advisor recognized this was a security risk and got them to change formation. As they approached a tree line to the south of Ap Bac, Tri began to get suspicious. So, he stopped his troops 150 meters from the woods and sent a recon force to check it out.<sup>79</sup> When the recon detachment got near the tree line, the Viet Cong opened fire, decimating the militiamen.<sup>80</sup> During the recon element's retreat, bad luck dealt a fatal blow to the task force. By chance the commander of the 842<sup>nd</sup> Company was killed and Capt. Tri was injured.<sup>81</sup> With several of their most important leaders out of the fight, the already poorly trained Civil Guard units put up little resistance - hiding behind the dikes for protection for the rest of the battle.<sup>82</sup> Fearing they could be overrun, Task Force A requested reinforcements.

At 0945, Col. Vann was instructed to determine a suitable landing site for the reinforcements.<sup>83</sup> He hoped to put the reserves on the other side of the woods from which

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<sup>79</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 60.

<sup>80</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 60.

<sup>82</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 35.

the Viet Cong were attacking the Task Force.<sup>84</sup> He became suspicious of another dense line of foliage running perpendicular to the first, just east of Ap Bac. But due to the Viet Cong's well concealed defenses, he determined that there were no Viet Cong in the tree line.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Vann unknowingly instructed the helicopters to land 300 meters from the Viet Cong position.<sup>86</sup> This placed them in a crossfire between two Viet Cong machine guns, the worst possible position for a landing. After the landing zone turned out to be a disaster, Vann tried to dodge responsibility by claiming that he had wanted to land the choppers farther away, but the helicopter pilots, who did not like him, disobeyed him, landing too close to the trees.<sup>87</sup> However, that is not what he told Richard Tregaskis just four days after the battle, when Tregaskis asked why Vann looked so upset. He replied that the brass had been asking him why he put the landing zone so close to the Viet Cong. His answer was: "I'm delighted when I get a chance to get at the enemy."<sup>88</sup> Vann made no mention of the pilots disobeying him. Vann's aggressiveness caused him to pick a risky landing site. As such, Vann alone was responsible for the selection of the bad landing site which was the source of the most significant element of the defeat at Ap Bac – the downing of five American helicopters.

The 102 men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment set out for the battlefield at 1000. Their choppers began to take fire as soon as they reached the landing zone. Despite this, they managed to unload all but one squad.<sup>89</sup> The last chopper to land, piloted by Lt. Lew

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<sup>84</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 214.

<sup>85</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 35.

<sup>86</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 36.

<sup>87</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 214.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 389.

<sup>89</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 72.

Stone took heavy fire. As Stone tried to pull out of the LZ, his engine was hit causing him to crash. The chopper of Chief Warrant Officer Charles Nysewander landed for a pickup. Just as Stone's crew got on board, the door gunner was hit, and the crew chief, Specialist Donald Braman, received a fatal wound. The passengers were forced to abandon the chopper; Braman was left behind, and he died several hours later. Then, Warrant Officer Carl Flippen's chopper attempted to rescue them and got shot down as well. After that attempt failed, one of the Huey attack helicopters attempted a rescue.<sup>90</sup> It was hit in the rotor and flipped crashing upside-down.<sup>91</sup> The door gunner for the Huey, Sergeant William Deal, was hit and died immediately.<sup>92</sup> The Viet Cong's preparation to fight the helicopters proved to be a stunning success.

As the helicopters were being shot down, the soldiers on the ground were pinned down by the Viet Cong.<sup>93</sup> In the rice paddies, the ARVN troops were exposed to enemy fire from all sides, trapped in a "horseshoe of fortifications."<sup>94</sup> Soldiers could hardly move in the waist-deep mud of the paddies and were hit before they could even fire.<sup>95</sup> Even when not being shot at, a man could easily fall when moving in the paddies.<sup>96</sup> It was nearly impossible for ARVN to carry out an attack in this terrain without suffering heavy casualties. Furthermore, an attack from this position would lack the force necessary to break through the enemy defenses. The advisor to the ARVN battalion tried

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<sup>90</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 378.

<sup>91</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 374.

<sup>92</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 375.

<sup>93</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 72.

<sup>94</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 379.

<sup>95</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 366.

<sup>96</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 377.

to get the troops to attack, but had no luck.<sup>97</sup> ARVN's decision not to attack was understandable. Because of the terrain, any attack over the paddies was practically suicidal. Many of the soldiers were wounded and whenever one rose up to fire their weapon, they got shot. The soldiers and the pilots hid behind the dikes in the paddies for protection for the rest of the battle.<sup>98</sup> ARVN's reinforcements had been defeated. The landing had been a disaster and American aircrews were trapped on the ground as a result.

Col. Vann then compounded his poor choice of a landing zone with another bad decision. At 1025, he ordered the mechanized company under the command of Captain Ly Tong Ba to move to the downed helicopters and rescue the crews.<sup>99</sup> Sending the mechanized company to rescue the downed crews, who were not in immediate danger, forced the rest of the battle into the same disadvantageous position in the rice paddies where the reinforcements were pinned down by the Viet Cong. As a result, all further ARVN attacks were against the strongest possible enemy position, putting them at a major tactical disadvantage. To win the battle, they would have to complete the herculean task of directly attacking fortified enemy positions through a machine gun crossfire over open terrain.

When Ba received the order, his men were stopped at the Orchid Canal, which he described as, "a terrible stream without any solid banks."<sup>100</sup> The canals of South Vietnam were very difficult for his APCs to cross. Earlier in the day, before the fighting started, it

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<sup>97</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 216.

<sup>98</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 379.

<sup>99</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 36.

<sup>100</sup> Ly Tong Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tông Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

had taken Ba's carriers an hour to cross one canal.<sup>101</sup> Ba believed it would take too long to cross for him to get immediate help to the helicopter crews. He suggested that Task Force B should be sent since they could reach the choppers quicker.<sup>102</sup> Ba's advisors and Vann interpreted his unwillingness to cross the canal as cowardice and viewed the difficulties crossing as an excuse to do nothing.<sup>103</sup> Vann even threatened to have Ba thrown in jail.<sup>104</sup> However, Ba's later conduct suggests he was no coward, and his reasons for not crossing immediately were entirely understandable. In fact, if rescuing the downed helicopter crews was so urgent that any delay from Ba was interpreted as cowardice, then it seems odd that Task Force B was even not asked to make an attempt.

During the argument with Vann, Ba's men were wading in the canal looking for a possible site to cross.<sup>105</sup> Despite this, American advisor Captain James Scanlon was under the impression that they were not looking for a crossing site.<sup>106</sup> However, this is understandable. Advisors often had no idea what was going on during operations according to Martin Dockery, another American advisor. They had trouble following the Vietnamese's orders and radio transmissions, and asking questions through a translator took valuable time away from more important matters, so they were only able to come to a very basic understanding of what was going on most of the time.<sup>107</sup> Even the American's official report on the battle acknowledged that due to the language barrier

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<sup>101</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 62.

<sup>102</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>103</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 231.

<sup>104</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>105</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu; Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 76.

<sup>106</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 62.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Dockery, *Lost in Translation: Vietnam: A Combat Advisor's Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 51.

they were unable to know exactly what the Vietnamese were doing.<sup>108</sup> Not understanding Ba's intentions, Scanlon and Vann misjudged his actions.

Eventually, either Scanlon or another advisor, Captain Robert Mays, suggested they use a crossing site further south that had been discovered by one of Ba's men that morning.<sup>109</sup> Ba agreed to use that crossing and after an hour they were finally on their way to the objective.<sup>110</sup> Then they ran into two more canals. The first was easy to cross, but the second and final canal was more difficult.<sup>111</sup> It was situated about 500 feet from the choppers. Scanlon wanted to make an immediate crossing, but Ba wanted to recon the canal first, so his vehicles did not get stuck. They followed Scanlon's suggestion and were forced to tow one of their carriers out of the water.<sup>112</sup> After this delay, the men got to work filling the canal with branches and dirt so that they could cross.<sup>113</sup> Once again the difficult terrain and a poor American decision slowed the ARVN advance to a crawl, making an attack more difficult.

As soon as 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon crossed the canal, Ba ordered its commander Sub-Lieutenant Nguyen Van Nhu to advance toward the enemy tree line and get a sense of the situation. Nhu's men quickly came under enemy fire.<sup>114</sup> First, they picked up the downed American pilots and secured them safely inside the carriers accomplishing their initial objective.<sup>115</sup> Then Nhu and another member of his crew, Sergeant Major Nguyen Van

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<sup>108</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 41.

<sup>109</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 62, 66.

<sup>110</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 36.

<sup>111</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 72.

<sup>112</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 62.

<sup>113</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 63.

<sup>114</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>115</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 66.

Hoa, were killed by Viet Cong fire -decimating the leadership of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon.<sup>116</sup> At this point, two more carriers crossed the canal and attacked on the left flank of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. They came under such heavy fire that the machine gunner of one M113 refused to stick his head out of the vehicle to aim out of fear of being shot, causing him to shoot randomly at the sky. The carriers unloaded the troops they had inside, who were immediately raked by the enemy machine guns.

The dismounted troops were unable to locate the source of the enemy fire due to the quality of the Viet Cong concealment, which left them unable to return effective suppressing fire. Outgunned and with their commander dead, the carriers reloaded their men and retreated to the canal, almost abandoning a wounded soldier in the paddy. The lack of aggressiveness displayed by these men in attacking the enemy, though understandable, hurt the company's chance of winning the battle. But the terrain and the Viet Cong's strong defensive positions were, in reality, the decisive factors in breaking their attack.

Finally, Ba and the rest of the carriers crossed, and Ba prepared to launch a coordinated assault on the enemy position. Capt. Mays suggested they try to flank the Viet Cong, but as the words escaped his lips Ba's carrier hit a mound in the paddy causing his machine gun to hit him in the head knocking him out for the next twenty minutes. Mays convinced Ba's troops to attack while he was unconscious, but they advanced in small groups that were demolished by the enemy.<sup>117</sup> Bad luck and the difficult nature of the paddies combined to deprive the soldiers of leadership at a key

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<sup>116</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>117</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 253; Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 66.

point in the battle and poor advice from an American led the company to attack during a disadvantageous situation. These factors contributed significantly to APC's failure to defeat the Viet Cong.

Another factor which contributed to ARVN's defeat at Ap Bac was America's flawed armored personnel carrier doctrine and design, which the Vietnamese had adopted. The machine guns mounted on top of the M113s were not protected by gun shields because American doctrine at the time claimed that suppressing the enemy by fire was enough protection from the enemy. However, Ba's men were unable to see the enemy through the foliage, making it impossible for them to deliver effective suppressive. As a result, they were left unprotected.<sup>118</sup> The gunners were exposed to excessive amounts of enemy fire, leading to many casualties in that vital position.<sup>119</sup> This was exacerbated by the fact that the vehicle commander and machine gunner was often the same person because the gunner's position was the best place for the commander to direct both the vehicle and the infantry they were carrying.<sup>120</sup> In this case, American vehicle design and tactical doctrine combined to put ARVN at a considerable disadvantage.

As a result, Capt. Mays' assault proved disastrous, greatly weakening the firepower, command ability, and morale of the company. One notable example of bad luck that contributed to the failure of the assault was the charge of the lone M113 with a flamethrower. It advanced into range of the Viet Cong positions and prepared to burn

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<sup>118</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 367.

<sup>119</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>120</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 253, 254.



them out of their woodland cover. This would have allowed their ARVN comrades to deliver more effective fire on the Viet Cong position, possibly turning the tide of the battle. A jet of flame shot out of the carrier's flamethrower burning a 20 to 30 meter arc of liquid fire into the sky and falling far short of the enemies defenses. The flamethrower was supposed to have a range of 100 meters but apparently not enough gelatin had been mixed with the gasoline before the battle to let it operate at maximum range.<sup>121</sup> Once more fate had dealt ARVN and the Americans a losing hand. A solid chance at breaking the enemy defenses had been spoiled by bad luck.

Ba finally came around and began to prepare for his attack. Vann wanted Ba to charge the Viet Cong defenses on top of the dike and let out the infantry, which he hoped would throw the insurgents into a panic causing them to flee.<sup>122</sup> However, Ba, a native of the delta, knew the land as well as the Viet Cong.<sup>123</sup> After many firefights with the insurgents in the paddies, he anticipated that they would move to the edge of the villages for greater protection and set up their fortifications on the dikes.<sup>124</sup> He knew that behind the dike there was a canal and if he charged over the dikes like Vann planned, his vehicles would get stuck in the canal making them sitting ducks.<sup>125</sup> So he planned to stop on top of the dike and fire down the Viet Cong's flanks to break their defenses.<sup>126</sup>

Ba's men advanced on the enemy position, but their attack lacked the force it needed to win due to the significant casualties suffered in the earlier attack. A few M113s

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<sup>121</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 63.

<sup>122</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 255.

<sup>123</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 230.

<sup>124</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 72.

<sup>125</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 255.

<sup>126</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 256.

managed to get close to the dike and began tossing grenades at the enemy machine guns but missed.<sup>127</sup> Despite these setbacks, the carriers' advance had still managed to severely weaken the Viet Cong line. But six of the guerillas began throwing grenades on top of the carriers injuring many of Ba's soldiers and disabling two of the APCs. The company was forced to abandon them.<sup>128</sup> Ba recognized that his men's morale was gone after the harsh Viet Cong counterattack and ordered them to fall back.<sup>129</sup> He claimed that the number of dead in the fight was even at eight.<sup>130</sup> However, the Viet Cong claimed that only three of their men were killed in the fighting.<sup>131</sup> In this part of the battle, Ba and his men had fought with intelligence and determination, but the courage of the Viet Cong and the disastrous losses to leadership and firepower that resulted from the flawed APC design led to their defeat.

After the fighting died down, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division command post became aware that ARVN paratroopers were being sent to the battlefield.<sup>132</sup> These troops had been ordered to land at Ap Bac and attack the Viet Cong by the Joint General Staff, and the Chief of Staff General Le Van Ty arrived at the command post to oversee the operation.<sup>133</sup> The American advisors tried to convince the Vietnamese to land the paras to the west of Ap Bac to prevent the insurgents from escaping, but Col. Dam informed them that the paras were landing in the east where Ba's men and the helicopters were located. The

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<sup>127</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 63.

<sup>128</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 75.

<sup>130</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 72.

<sup>131</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 19.

<sup>132</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 26.

<sup>133</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 20.

Americans considered this an act of cowardice on Dam's part because they believed he was trying to let the Viet Cong get away, but he was simply following orders from JGS.<sup>134</sup> Initially, General Huynh Van Cao, the commander of IV Corps, set the drop time at 1600, with enough daylight to make the attack.<sup>135</sup> However, JGS later changed it to 1800 when it would be dark, hampering the attack. This caused Vann to suspect that Cao was attempting to avoid a fight out of cowardice, but Cao replied, "they're supposed to be here. Saigon is late."<sup>136</sup> After the fact, both Vann and journalist Neil Sheehan put the blame on Cao for the change in the time of the drop, but as Cao correctly pointed out, it was a JGS decision.

As the 8<sup>th</sup> Airborne Battalion approached the landing zone the American advisor, Colonel Triplett, shook his head and said, "Too late! Too late!"<sup>137</sup> Compounding the challenges presented by the late landing, the paras accidentally jumped out at the end of their run and missed the drop zone, landing to the north near Ap Tan Thoi.<sup>138</sup> One ARVN soldier who made the jump described it as jumping "into a curtain of VC gunfire."<sup>139</sup> As they descended, the Viet Cong shot them from the sky. Some even landed on Viet Cong positions and were quickly killed.<sup>140</sup> Only half of the battalion managed to jump because it was too dark and the ones who did were spread over a kilometer. In the dark it was hard for the paras to assemble for an assault, leading to small, scattered attacks that were

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<sup>134</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 27.

<sup>135</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 259.

<sup>136</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 261.

<sup>137</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 367.

<sup>138</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 68.

<sup>139</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 367.

<sup>140</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 20.

easily pushed back.<sup>141</sup> By 1950, the paratroopers had quit their assault.<sup>142</sup> Yet another ARVN attempt to push the Viet Cong out of Ap Bac ended in failure. Poor decisions by the JGS on the location of the drop zone and the selection of a drop time put the paras in a position to fail. This was compounded by the bad luck of dropping in the wrong place and hard fighting by the Viet Cong.

A comparison of the leadership of the three sides during the battle can give us a better sense of why ARVN failed, and the Viet Cong succeeded. 7<sup>th</sup> Division commander Colonel Dam was back at the division command post and did not really control the battle, leaving his men without much leadership which certainly contributed to ARVN's defeat.<sup>143</sup> Instead of Dam, Col. Vann was the one flying over the battlefield giving orders. Vann went on a tirade during the middle of the battle. Neil Sheehan describes Vann at this time as "almost manic with anger and frustration."<sup>144</sup> Another reporter, Richard Tregaskis, described Vann four days after the battle as still "roaring mad."<sup>145</sup> Capt. Ba commented that "Vann was an advisory officer who was too hot-headed, overly enthusiastic, and afraid of being held responsible for failure. His attitude was, 'if we win, then OK, but if we lose, I'll blame someone else.'"<sup>146</sup> During the argument with Ba over the delay in crossing the canals Vann attempted to get Ba to cross the river by shaming him and by threatening to throw him in jail.<sup>147</sup> Vann's outrageous conduct caused the

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<sup>141</sup> Viet, *Steel and Blood*, 368.

<sup>142</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 68.

<sup>143</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 41.

<sup>144</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 227.

<sup>145</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 389

<sup>146</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu.

<sup>147</sup> Ba, "Trận Ấp Bắc (Cựu tướng Lý Tòng Bá)". Dong Song Cu; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 231.

Vietnamese to ignore his advice for the rest of the battle leading to less effective leadership.

This is in stark contrast to the conduct of the Viet Cong commander, Hei Hoang. His men considered him to be a very friendly leader. One described him as such, “he was very fair and never oppressed anyone. If a man had done something wrong, he criticized him for it, but he didn’t do so in an arrogant manner.”<sup>148</sup> Needless to say, Hoang was beloved by his men. Furthermore, his easy-going command style enabled him to successfully lead the joint command of the 261<sup>st</sup> and 514<sup>th</sup> Battalions at Ap Bac.<sup>149</sup> Unlike Vann, Hoang calmly guided his men to victory.

Ba too was beloved by his men. So much so that they still refer to him by his callsign “Quoc Bao” in their letters to him.<sup>150</sup> He clearly cared about his men. Long after the war had ended, he fondly remembered the beautiful singing of a soldier named Nghia and an interesting soldier called ‘Scorpion’ Sung because he enjoyed eating scorpions.<sup>151</sup> Ba recalled holding his men as they lay dying and receiving one final smile as the soldier breathed his last breath.<sup>152</sup> Vann’s description of Ba as a coward is especially absurd, since Ba was considered one of the most aggressive ARVN commanders by U.S. advisors.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, Ba’s explanation for not crossing the canals immediately was entirely reasonable, and not the result of cowardice. He also demonstrated his intelligence

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<sup>148</sup> David Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975* (New York: An East Gate Book, 2003), 401.

<sup>149</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 402.

<sup>150</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 69.

<sup>151</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 80-1.

<sup>152</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 80.

<sup>153</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 230.

by anticipating the Viet Cong's position in the dikes, one of the few bright, shining moments in the battle.

After the litany of failures by the Vietnamese and Americans recounted above the battle looks like a total disaster, but at the end ARVN managed to win a small victory against the Viet Cong. As the Viet Cong attempted to escape, Ba's men moved 300 meters into the woods on what their advisor Capt. Mays thought was an attempt to bivouac for the night.<sup>154</sup> Ba had spent the hours since the earlier fight figuring out what he was going to do next. At night Ba ordered his men to attack the insurgents position once again.<sup>155</sup> At Ong Boi bridge Ba's men got into a firefight with a squad of Viet Cong who had stayed behind to carry out a delaying action while the rest of the insurgents withdrew during the night. In the fighting the ARVN troops killed a guerilla who had thrown one of the grenades that forced them to retreat earlier.<sup>156</sup> The Viet Cong sent a team of three men to recover their comrade's body, but fire from Ba's men stopped them and the recovery team withdrew with the rest of the Viet Cong.<sup>157</sup> Ba claimed that the enemy had been "overrun and dispersed."<sup>158</sup> In reality, he had won a minor skirmish, but it was a victory. On 2 January 1963, ARVN needed all the victories it could get.

The last moments of the battle, when the Viet Cong withdrew, are perhaps its most confusing. The Americans wanted to use artillery to decimate the Viet Cong as they fled.<sup>159</sup> To do this they needed flares to light up the area. This would allow aircraft to spot

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<sup>154</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 66.

<sup>155</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 75.

<sup>156</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 22.

<sup>157</sup> MACV, *Ap Bac Battle*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 59.

<sup>159</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 37.

the Viet Cong so that artillery could accurately bring its fire down on the enemy. However, ARVN decided not to use the flares, because they were worried it might also give the enemy a better shot at the paratroopers. As a result, ARVN agreed to fire only four rounds of artillery per hour, far too little to crush the Viet Cong.<sup>160</sup> The Americans of course saw this as an act of cowardice for allowing the enemy to get away. However, ARVN did fire star shells which also illuminate the battlefield.<sup>161</sup> The use of the star shells makes no sense. If ARVN did not want to fire the flares to protect the paras or to avoid killing the Viet Cong, then why fire the star shells? Since ARVN fired the star shells, why did they not use enough firepower to destroy the enemy? Why didn't the Americans just use their aircraft while the star shells were up to wipe out the Viet Cong? None of these questions has a satisfying answer. Whether due to mistakes either by the Americans or Vietnamese or both, the artillery fire failed to stop the Viet Cong's withdrawal.

There are many well-known acronyms that came out of the United States military experience in Vietnam. One of the most famous is FUBAR, which means: fouled up beyond all recognition. Ap Bac was the FUBAR battle. Failures by the Americans and Vietnamese, tough fighting by the Viet Cong, bad luck, and poor terrain all worked together to produce a South Vietnamese defeat. To many, Ap Bac was interpreted as a sign that ARVN was losing the fight against the Viet Cong.<sup>162</sup> It has continuously been treated as representative of ARVN's military performance throughout the early years of

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<sup>160</sup> Senior Advisor, "After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963," 37.

<sup>161</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 265.

<sup>162</sup> Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 251.

the Vietnam War. In many histories about the war, it is the only battle during this period that they mention.<sup>163</sup>

However, an examination of ARVN's military performance in 1962 and the rest of 1963 reveals that Ap Bac was not representative of ARVN's conduct in the war as is normally presumed. The numerous twists and turns in the course of the war are overlooked as a result of the singular focus on Ap Bac. All of ARVN's impressive victories are entirely forgotten. The broader strategic implications of the larger military situation are ignored in favor of portraying one tactical defeat as the be all end all of the war during this period. When the battle is placed into its proper historical context, the Diem regime's view of Ap Bac as a "bump on the road to victory" feels like a more appropriate judgement of the importance of the battle.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Gregory Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55-56; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 131-136; and Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 37-51.

<sup>164</sup> Edward Miller, *Misalliance*, 252.



### CHAPTER III - THE YEAR OF THE TIGER: 1962

Since 1954, an unsteady peace had settled over the Republic of Vietnam as it increased its control over the countryside and prepared its military for the coming war. Communist hold-overs in the South with the aid and direction of the North Vietnamese government prepared popular support for a guerilla struggle to overthrow the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. The peace fell apart in 1959 when the communist guerillas began a terrorist campaign to break government control over the countryside. They blew up schools, bridges, and government offices and even staged prison breaks.<sup>165</sup> The guerillas were also able to intimidate local schools into teaching communist propaganda instead of the government curriculum, highlighting their increasing control of the countryside. In July, they demonstrated that they were becoming more aggressive by attacking an American compound in Bien Hoa.<sup>166</sup>

In early January 1960, the guerillas launched two attacks that demonstrated their increasing ability to challenge the government. In Kien Hoa, they staged an armed uprising that overran the government militia and seized control of several villages temporarily.<sup>167</sup> Towards the end of the month, they attacked an ARVN military base in Trang Sup, Tay Ninh Province and managed to seize a large number of weapons.<sup>168</sup> The war for Vietnam had begun and the communists held the initiative. The war for Vietnam was to be a bloody civil war in which brother fought brother and neighbor fought neighbor.

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<sup>165</sup> Nguyen Cong Luan, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 177.

<sup>166</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 178.

<sup>167</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 179-180.

<sup>168</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 180.

Later in the year, a battalion-sized guerilla force overran several ARVN outposts in the mountains north of Kontum. ARVN responded by sending three battalions to hunt the insurgents, including one elite Airborne unit. They managed to kill more than one hundred enemies, but nearly four hundred were allowed to escape.<sup>169</sup> Emboldened by their ability to successfully challenge the government, the North announced the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) for South Vietnam on 20 December 1960.<sup>170</sup> The NLF became known as the ‘Viet Cong,’ a Vietnamese abbreviation for ‘Vietnamese communist.’

In 1961, the Viet Cong insurgency increased in intensity and large attacks were carried out throughout South Vietnam. In March, two Viet Cong battalions attacked an ARVN battalion in Kien Phong and in September the insurgents captured government outposts in Kontum and the capital of Phouc Thanh Province, where they killed the province chief and deputy chief.<sup>171</sup> American and Vietnamese leaders realized that the war was going poorly and that an increased effort had to be made if the South was to achieve victory.<sup>172</sup> President John F. Kennedy increased aid for counterinsurgency and militia training in Vietnam and began equipping ARVN with more modern military equipment like helicopters. Kennedy’s most important contribution to the war effort was the infusion of thousands of American military advisers into all levels of ARVN.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 186.

<sup>170</sup> Ha Mai Viet, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>171</sup> Ha, *Steel and Blood*, 4.

<sup>172</sup> Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-65*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136.

<sup>173</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 142-143.

South Vietnamese officer Nguyen Cong Luan contends that Kennedy brought hope to the anticommunist effort in South Vietnam.<sup>174</sup>

The positive effects of the increased American effort gradually became apparent throughout 1962 as American men and money slowly trickled into Vietnam. In 1962, the number of Americans stationed in Vietnam increased from 2,600 to 11,500.<sup>175</sup> To oversee the advisory effort and command American forces in Vietnam, President Kennedy created the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) under the command of General Paul Harkins on 8 February 1962.<sup>176</sup> With its new American aid, ARVN went on the offensive seeking to regain the initiative and to retake lost territory from the Viet Cong.

In January 1962, ARVN began to implement this more aggressive stance but suffered a major loss on 8 January when Lt. Col. Doung Vhun Sang the commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, was killed in an ambush along with his driver.<sup>177</sup> Luckily, he was replaced by Lt. Col. Huynh Van Cao who was considered one of ARVN's most aggressive and effective commanders.<sup>178</sup> ARVN forces were spread thin throughout the country. They were primarily engaged in static defensive positions that were over exposed to enemy attack and could easily be overrun. Their American advisors encouraged them to be more aggressive in combating the Viet Cong.<sup>179</sup> ARVN followed

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<sup>174</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 200.

<sup>175</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 155.

<sup>176</sup> E. W. Kenworthy. "Pentagon Sets Up Vietnam Command Under a General," *New York Times*, February 9, 1962.

<sup>177</sup> "Vietnamese Colonel Killed," *New York Times*, January 9, 1962.

<sup>178</sup> Homer Bigart, "Red Infiltrators Dominate Region Near Saigon," *New York Times*, January 11, 1962.

<sup>179</sup> Bigart, "Red Infiltrators."

their advice and began leaving their outposts. The Civil Guards and the Self Defense Corps – a hamlet level South Vietnamese militia that cooperated closely with the district level Civil Guards – were instructed to take up the static defense of villages while ARVN challenged the Viet Cong's ability to control the countryside.<sup>180</sup> Towards the end of the month ARVN units executed mopping up operations in central and southern Vietnam killing fifty-one Viet Cong and capturing twenty-seven more.<sup>181</sup> However, ARVN's newfound aggressiveness did not always produce results as demonstrated when four battalions attempted to wipe out several hundred Viet Cong in Binh Hoa. The large force easily alerted the guerillas who withdrew quickly. ARVN failed to inflict significant damage on their prey killing as many civilians as they did insurgents: five.<sup>182</sup>

The following month began with a similar operation on 4 February in Hung My to capture or kill any Viet Cong in the area. ARVN air assaulted into the area of operations on helicopters, the sight of which caused some 130 Viet Cong to immediately abandon their trenches and foxholes in a hasty withdrawal. ARVN managed to capture three Viet Cong but poor coordination with available air support prevented effective strafing of the fleeing guerillas. While the insurgents once again escaped ARVN's grasp, the operation is most notable for being the first time an American helicopter was shot down in Vietnam.<sup>183</sup> In late February, ARVN again faced the Viet Cong in Operation Jungle Jim in the Dak Bron Valley. An ARVN infantry regiment with two Ranger platoons and a Ranger company was ordered to kill or capture any Viet Cong in the area and secure the

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<sup>180</sup> Homer Bigart, "Saigon Abandons Border Outposts," *New York Times*, January 16, 1962.

<sup>181</sup> "Saigon Troops Mop Up Reds," *New York Times*, January 31, 1962.

<sup>182</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 153.

<sup>183</sup> "U.S. Copters Rout Reds in Vietnam," *New York Times*, February 5, 1962.

local Montagnard population. The ARVN forces swept the area from the northeast and conducted aggressive small unit patrols. They successfully broke the Viet Cong control over the area according to their American advisors killing sixteen, wounding thirty-one, and capturing four.<sup>184</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recognized that ARVN was aggressively attacking the enemy and that they were increasingly able to capture and hold Viet Cong controlled areas. He determined America would continue to support the South until eventual victory.<sup>185</sup>

In March 1962 ARVN offensive action exploded as they regained the initiative and began to exert increasing pressure on the Viet Cong. On 6 March, the Commander of the United States Pacific Command which oversaw the Vietnam War, Admiral Harry D. Felt, told reporters that the South was on the offensive.<sup>186</sup> On 2 March, a Task Force of four Ranger companies and a recon company with artillery and air support were ordered to destroy the Viet Cong in Vinh Binh in order to relieve pressure on the local Self Defense Corps troops and to show the population that the government could protect them. The air assault on the village was delayed by problems with helicopters and poor selection of landing zones caused some units to set down two thousand meters from the objective, forcing them to make a one-and-a-half-hour march. This allowed most Viet Cong to escape with few casualties.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> ORLL 3, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>185</sup> Jack Raymond, “McNamara Reports Gains by Vietnamese,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1962.

<sup>186</sup> Homer Bigart, “Admiral Felt Asserts Saigon is On Offensive Against Reds,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1962.

<sup>187</sup> ORLL 4, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

On 5 March, ARVN finally managed to inflict heavy casualties on the Viet Cong. Nearly five hundred insurgents attacked a Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps Outpost at night at Bo Tuc in Tay Ninh Province in order to capture weapons. The Viet Cong put the outpost under a hail of submachine gun and mortar fire while they used a bazooka to penetrate the defenses. ARVN Lt. Nguyen Van Ut used his own mortar to hold off the insurgents until the air force arrived, forcing the guerillas to withdraw. The VNAF's jets spotted the insurgents resting about a mile from Bo Tuc and fired on them. Paratroopers were then sent to determine the effectiveness of the strike and counted at least fifty-six Viet Cong killed in action.<sup>188</sup> For the first time ARVN had successfully coordinated with their air support to inflict high casualties on the insurgents. This became an effective model for combat operations against the Viet Cong, ARVN would engage the enemy and the VNAF would finish them off with air strikes. After the fight at Bo Tuc, the local commander wanted to move the Airborne battalion that had confirmed the Air Force's kills and another battalion out of the area. From 9 to 11 March, the two battalions were ordered to conduct a reconnaissance in force east to link up with two more battalions and kill any Viet Cong they discovered along the way. The defeat at Bo Tuc had forced the Viet Cong into hiding resulting in no contact, but it did demonstrate that the South Vietnamese government had gained the advantage over the insurgent forces in the area.<sup>189</sup>

On the eighth, ARVN repeated the success of Bo Tuc in a heliborne operation at Cai Nhay in An Xuyen province. An ARVN infantry battalion, a Marine battalion, a

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<sup>188</sup> Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Fliers Save 2 Outposts," *New York Times*, March 6, 1962, and Bigart, "Admiral Felt Asserts."

<sup>189</sup> ORLL 5, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

Ranger company, and a recon company with air and naval support conducted an air assault into Cai Nhay with the objective of capturing or killing the two hundred Viet Cong in the area. The South's forces landed at four landing zones in two groups from fourteen H-21 helicopters.<sup>190</sup> During the landing, five of the helicopters were hit and one was disabled requiring an entire platoon to be pulled from the operation to guard it.<sup>191</sup> The initial landing group was not large enough to encircle the entire area of operations allowing the Viet Cong to escape.<sup>192</sup> During the fight, ARVN soldiers took cover in a ditch under some shade in the rice paddies and did not advance until prodded by their adviser and then only cautiously.<sup>193</sup> However, this was likely to avoid getting pinned down in the open paddies and exposed to enemy fire where they could easily suffer heavy casualties. Effective coordination with air support salvaged the day producing at least thirty-eight Viet Cong killed in action.<sup>194</sup> Just a week before, these same insurgents had killed twenty in an ambush including the province chief.<sup>195</sup> Now, they fled at the sight of ARVN further demonstrating that ARVN could take any Viet Cong controlled area back for the government. However, it gives no insight into ARVN's ability to hold villages from the Viet Cong as available records do not report whether the village stayed under ARVN control or was retaken by the Viet Cong.

Most importantly, the battle at Cai Nhay demonstrates the government's ability to contest the Mekong Delta, which has traditionally been considered the Viet Cong's main

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<sup>190</sup> ORLL 1, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>191</sup> Homer Bigart, "U.S. Copters Help in Vietnam Raid," *New York Times*, March 9, 1962.

<sup>192</sup> ORLL 1, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472.

<sup>193</sup> Bigart, "U.S. Copters Help."

<sup>194</sup> ORLL 1, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472.

<sup>195</sup> Bigart, "U.S. Copters Help."

base of support in South Vietnam. Earlier in the war, it was believed that the Viet Cong controlled eighty percent of the villages in the Mekong Delta.<sup>196</sup> However, ARVN had begun to turn the tide. *The New York Times* reported that “energetic counter-guerilla action by Government forces has produced a marked improvement in the security of five provinces in the upper Mekong Delta of South Vietnam.”<sup>197</sup> ARVN’s success in the Mekong continued throughout the year. The Cai Nhay battle also illustrated the continuing effectiveness of air support in following through ARVN victories.

In 1960 and 1961, the Viet Cong were on the offensive and controlled the initiative in their war against the South. Just three months into 1962, the first year of increased American involvement, the situation had changed drastically. ARVN was now on the offensive and it controlled the initiative, allowing it to fight the Viet Cong at times and places of ARVN’s choosing. It had demonstrated that it could effectively take and hold Viet Cong controlled territory and that with well-coordinated air support it could inflict significant casualties on the enemy. South Vietnam was beginning to turn the tide of the war in their favor.

ARVN’s success with air support and in the Mekong Delta continued in a confrontation in Vinh Binh Province and two significant operations in An Giang Province in the middle of the month. On 14 March, one thousand five hundred ARVN troops launched a combined air and ground attack against the Viet Cong in Vinh Binh. They made contact with the enemy and called in air support which killed nearly two hundred

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<sup>196</sup> Bigart, “Red Infiltrators.”

<sup>197</sup> Homer Bigart, “Safety Improving in Rural Vietnam,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1962.



Viet Cong.<sup>198</sup> In this battle in the Delta, ARVN killed almost as many Viet Cong as they had killed in the first ten days of March throughout Vietnam: 330.<sup>199</sup> A day later, on 15 March, ARVN carried out operation La Chap in An Giang. An ARVN Ranger and recon company was tasked with killing or capturing Viet Cong in the area. They were assisted by a reserve consisting of another Ranger company and an infantry battalion. Their objective was the village of Phu Hoi which was bisected by a river. Each company landed on opposite sides of the river and attacked in a pincer movement. They marked their position with smoke grenades, allowing air support to attack the Viet Cong without having to worry about friendly casualties. However, the result of the battle was mixed. Only five Viet Cong killed in action were confirmed, but seventy were captured which was even more useful than killing the enemy since the prisoners could be used to gather intelligence, which could be used to produce greater gains in future operations.<sup>200</sup>

The south kept up the pressure on the Viet Cong in An Giang on 17 March. Thirteen helicopters ferried 131 ARVN soldiers in an air assault on the village of An Phu.<sup>201</sup> Once again ARVN made contact with the enemy and called in air support as the Viet Cong attempted to withdraw. They did not escape in time and suffered forty-five men killed and another sixty-five captured by the government.<sup>202</sup> In less than a week, ARVN had killed roughly 250 Viet Cong and taken 135 prisoners. Air support enabled

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<sup>198</sup> "Vietnamese Drive to Trap Reds Only Partial Success," *New York Times*, March 15, 1962.

<sup>199</sup> "Losses in Vietnam Rise," *New York Times* March 11, 1962.

<sup>200</sup> ORLL 8, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>201</sup> Homer Bigart, "U.S. Copters Rout Force in Vietnam," *New York Times*, March 18, 1962.

<sup>202</sup> "Vietnam Reds Strafed," *New York Times*, March 17, 1962.

ARVN to inflict serious punishment on the NLF wherever they went which allowed them to contest the Viet Cong's control of the countryside even in the Mekong Delta.

However, not all operations in this period were as successful for ARVN.

Sometimes they made little contact with the Viet Cong killing few enemies and securing few villages. One such operation took place from 1 to 14 March in Kien Hoa and Dinh Tuong. It was called Operation Dan Tien VIII and it was conducted by two brigade task forces made up of six infantry battalions of regular and provincial troops with artillery and helicopter support. They were tasked with destroying two battalions of Viet Cong in the area. One Task Force was ordered to encircle the area of operations and block the enemies escape with help from the artillery, while the other swept the area for Viet Cong. ARVN failed to find the Viet Cong who withdrew from any contact and only managed to destroy some enemy bases.<sup>203</sup> The cause of failure in Operation Dan Tien VIII was the size of the force conducting the operation. In An Giang, small forces were used to entice the Viet Cong into a fight, but in Dan Tien VIII the nearly division sized ARVN force alerted the Viet Cong to their presence. The Viet Cong wisely chose not to engage the larger force. American advisers realized that small unit attacks were the key to getting the Viet Cong to fight and began to push their ARVN counterparts to replicate the successful tactics of An Giang.

On 2 April 1962, the ARVN 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, with a Ranger company for reinforcements, attacked a Viet Cong stronghold in Binh Dinh Province, which the Viet Cong considered safe from enemy attack due to its difficult hilly terrain. A portion of the

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<sup>203</sup> ORLL 7, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

attack force blocked the Viet Cong escape from the North while one hundred troops in twelve helicopters air assaulted the enemy. The Viet Cong were caught flat footed and did not immediately return fire. ARVN was aggressive and attacked immediately. The increased mobility provided by the new helicopters enabled ARVN to surprise the Viet Cong which contributed significantly to their success. In the fighting, they killed some thirty enemies and suffered only one man killed in action.<sup>204</sup> This battle demonstrates the considerable strides ARVN was making towards improvement. For the most part, they got into contact with the enemy and relied on air support to finish them off. Now, they were attacking aggressively and achieving battlefield success on their own. Going forward they continued to improve in this area.

However, at the time aggressive fighting was not yet the norm as demonstrated by two battles on 4 April. A Viet Cong force of two hundred ambushed a security patrol at the ARVN Ranger Training Center in Binh Duong Province. The patrol was trying to clear a road for a convoy and used a routine patrol route. They ran into an L shaped Viet Cong ambush trapping them in an enemy crossfire at a turn in the road. The security platoon began to take casualties, but a BAR gunner and two soldiers on the flank took cover and returned fire inflicting most of the enemy's more than thirty casualties. They likely saved their platoon. Then, two Ranger companies arrived to help allowing the security platoon to withdraw. However, the Rangers failed to aggressively pursue the Viet Cong as they disengaged.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Homer Bigart, "South Vietnam's Troops Invade Communist Stronghold in Hills," *New York Times*, April 2, 1962.

<sup>205</sup> ORLL 10, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

On the same day in Kien Hao Province, a South Vietnamese force comprised mostly of militia with a single Ranger company was tasked with clearing the island of Long Hoa of Viet Cong. The majority of the force attacked from the north in sampans sweeping the island, but a second attack planned for a day later by two civil guard companies on the Southern portion of the island was prevented by low tide which made ferrying the troops to the island impossible. The Viet Cong used this opening to escape. The American advisors considered the operation only a partial success despite seventeen Viet Cong killed in action because the South Vietnamese troops failed to aggressively attack the enemy.<sup>206</sup> ARVN troops still lacked aggressiveness, especially the militia, but until they became more competent the advantages of air power usually gave them the upper hand against the Viet Cong. During this period ARVN suffered no major defeats. For them, a bad day was failing to make contact with the enemy or allowing them to get away, which aptly demonstrates how ARVN had come to dominate the battlefield.

ARVN also experienced success on the battlefield when the Viet Cong got up the courage to attack them. On 7 April, ARVN spies shared intelligence about an imminent attack by 1,200 Viet Cong around An Hoa. Six hundred Viet Cong attacked one ARVN garrison of 110 men commanded by Captain Nguyen Van Be who kept some of his forces outside of the compound to trap the guerillas. When the Viet Cong attacked the compound, the men outside attacked the enemy rear catching them in a crossfire. Then ARVN lowered its 155mm cannons to fire directly into the advancing Viet Cong at point blank range. The barrage broke up the NLF attack and they withdrew, leaving thirty-eight

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<sup>206</sup> ORLL 9, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

bodies behind. Simultaneously, six hundred more Viet Cong attacked a militia post near Tra Bong which also managed to fight them off, killing seven enemies. After the battle, an American adviser was quoted as saying, “A few more wins like this and the back of the Viet Cong in the area will be broken.”<sup>207</sup> In the previous years, the Viet Cong had been able to overrun government positions, but now ARVN staunchly defended them. ARVN was continuing to gain the upper hand in all phases of the war. Furthermore, Captain Nguyen’s decision to flank the Viet Cong assault demonstrates the improving leadership and tactical abilities of ARVN officers.

In late April, ARVN experienced its most important success so far. Operation Tiger Hunt was conducted from 12 to 27 April in an area forty kilometers north of Dalat in Vietnam’s densely jungled Central Highlands. Three ARVN infantry battalions, a Ranger company, a recon company, and some local forces were tasked with killing or capturing any Viet Cong in the area, the usual mission of ARVN forces. The three infantry battalions swept the area from North to South while the rest of the troops were used as blocking forces. The Viet Cong cleared out rather than fight, but towards the end of the operation ARVN left some forces behind to set up ambushes – called stayback patrols – for the returning Viet Cong. The American advisers judged these stayback patrols as effective killing numerous guerillas. ARVN was improving its ability to take back Viet Cong controlled territory, but it still lacked staying power. At the end of the operation, the local population asked to be evacuated out of the Viet Cong controlled area.<sup>208</sup> In insurgent warfare, winning the hearts and minds of the people is considered

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<sup>207</sup> Homer Bigart, “Spies Help Vietnam Smash Red Assault,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1962.

<sup>208</sup> ORLL 11, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

key to success. The Viet Cong worked very hard to accomplish this objective. Historians generally believe that the Viet Cong had the support of Vietnam's rural population during the war. Operation Tiger Hunt demonstrates that some populations under Viet Cong control preferred the South Vietnamese government and suggests that popular support for the Diem regime was greater than scholars and journalists have demonstrated.

Despite ARVN's ever-increasing success in the month of April, tragedy struck on 8 April when two American advisers were killed in action and two more were captured. These men were the first Americans killed by enemy gunfire in the Vietnam War, although some men had died earlier in plane crashes.<sup>209</sup> They were ambushed in the village of An Chau in Quang Nam province while showing members of the Self Defense Corps how to conduct a perimeter defense. They were attacked from the forest and overran by around one hundred Viet Cong. The Americans held off the enemy for half an hour, but were unable to get any reinforcements.<sup>210</sup> The American war in Vietnam began here in a small village in the Central Highlands. Before the war was finished, 58,316 more Americans joined them. When they died, ARVN was steadily gaining ground against the Viet Cong.

From 28 April to 1 May, two companies of the ARVN 23<sup>rd</sup> Division, a recon platoon, and four militia companies carried out Operation Raindrop in the mountainous central highlands town of Ban Me Thuot. Their mission was to retake an important Vietnamese village called an Agroville and kill any Viet Cong they found. An Agroville was a fortified village made up of peasants resettled from isolated areas in order to spread

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<sup>209</sup> Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Reds Kill 2 G.I.'s; 2 Missing" *New York Times*, April 9, 1962.

<sup>210</sup> Homer Bigart, "2 G.I.'s in Vietnam Died in Ambush," *New York Times*, April 10, 1962.

government control to the rural countryside as part of the 1959 Agrovillage Program. ARVN surrounded the village by air and assaulted the village. A firefight started in which six guerillas were killed while the government troops took no casualties. The Agrovillage was retaken but most of the Viet Cong who had occupied it escaped.<sup>211</sup> Once again, ARVN demonstrated their ability to retake villages taken by the Viet Cong, but they still needed to improve their ability to prevent the Viet Cong from taking villages back. ARVN's ability to protect the villages was key to victory in the war.

ARVN won another important victory on 1 May in the village of Vinh Long in the III Corps Tactical Zone in southern Vietnam. Three companies of Rangers supported by a company of Civil Guards carried out Operation Son Ca in which they air assaulted Viet Cong in the vicinity. ARVN suffered no casualties in the fight. They managed to kill eight guerillas and capture twenty-five more, but American advisers argued that if they had stayed in the area longer conducting stay-back patrols they may have won an even greater victory.<sup>212</sup> Still, ARVN continued to demonstrate its ability to gain the upper hand against the insurgents.

Another battle took place on 12 May when ARVN conducted an air assault into the Plain of Reeds region of the Mekong Delta – a vast swamp land in southern Vietnam. They were trying to trap the 502<sup>nd</sup> Viet Cong Battalion which had executed thirty civilians in a nearby village just the week before. In the ensuing firefight twenty guerillas were killed in action. ARVN's only casualty was the result of a freak accident in which

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<sup>211</sup> ORLL 12, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>212</sup> ORLL 14, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

the helicopter landing spooked a water buffalo, which proceeded to trample a trooper to death.<sup>213</sup> The battle was a solid victory for the South Vietnamese which continued to keep the enemy off balance – a situation they could hopefully exploit for greater gains in future operations.

On 23 May, American adviser Captain Richard Ziegler helped plan a 7<sup>th</sup> Division operation against the 504<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Battalion in the Plain of Reeds. He planned for ARVN to attack from multiple directions with probing task forces in the hopes of flushing out the Viet Cong. The plan worked to great effect and air strikes caught the insurgents in the open, killing twenty-six. Twenty-four more guerillas were captured by ARVN including the battalion commander.<sup>214</sup> Air power continued to prove its effectiveness against the Viet Cong. With American air support ARVN was clearly gaining the upper hand over their foe.

Convoy escorts were an important part of ARVN's operational duties. Convoys were extremely vulnerable to ambushes. On 16 June, a convoy was traveling from Ben Cat to Bien Hoa escorted by two M8 armored cars each with a 37mm main cannon and two platoons of ARVN infantry.<sup>215</sup> Near Bien Hoa, they ran into a Viet Cong ambush that had been prepared earlier in the morning. A mine destroyed a civilian vehicle that was in front of the convoy, killing eight passengers. Recoilless rifles were fired from prepared positions knocking out both armored cars.<sup>216</sup> Air support in the form of a B-26 Marauder

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<sup>213</sup> Homer Bigart, "Raid in Vietnam a Minor Success," *New York Times*, May 14, 1962.

<sup>214</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 52.

<sup>215</sup> Donald Martin, *Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report #61 - Part V - Air Operations - October 1961 to December 1963* (Washington: Air Force, 1964), 51.

<sup>216</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 52.



and two AD-6 Skyraiders took off after three hours but managed to catch the fleeing Viet Cong killing fifty and allowing the government troops to recover stolen weapons.<sup>217</sup> ARVN suffered five men killed in action and eight wounded. Two American advisers died in the fighting.<sup>218</sup> Once again air power demonstrated its ability to salvage ARVN failures. The Air Force was continually proving it was the difference in the war giving the South Vietnamese the upper hand against the Viet Cong.

After the battle, the ARVN Joint General Staff required air support for all convoys in order to counter the ambushes. This new policy quickly proved effective. For the first seven months of the year, there had only been thirty-two requests for convoy air support. From August to October, there were 506 and a MACV report from 29 November stated, “no convoy with air cover had been ambushed.”<sup>219</sup> This improvement in convoy escort capabilities further demonstrates ARVN’s growing success on the battlefield. With the help of American air support, they were able to improve in most aspects of military operations.

However, when the new policies were not followed, it could result in failure, as an ambush against a convoy on 14 July demonstrates. Two companies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Battalion were escorting a fourteen-vehicle convoy. A Viet Cong battalion set off four mines as the third and fourth vehicles of the convoy passed. They charged the damaged vehicles in the hopes of capturing weapons, while taking the rest of the convoy under fire. The ARVN troops in the front vehicles aggressively counterattacked against the

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<sup>217</sup> Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years To 1965* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1981), 145.

<sup>218</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 53.

<sup>219</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 54.

guerilla's flank forcing them to withdraw. The fight lasted ten minutes. The paratroopers suffered twenty-three men killed in action and were unable to confirm any enemy casualties though they did follow blood trails for a while suggesting they at least seriously injured several Viet Cong.<sup>220</sup> The convoy broke protocol by moving without air support and paid the price for it. However, the elite paratroopers fought aggressively and mitigated the damage proving that ARVN's combat abilities were continuously increasing, even in a situation as chaotic as an ambush.

On 20 July, ARVN won its most impressive victory of the year so far. The 7<sup>th</sup> Division entered the Plain of Reeds hoping to destroy the 504<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Battalion. Two infantry companies – one armed with the experimental AR-15 assault rifle – conducted five landings in order to flush out the insurgents. The first three landings turned up no results. The fourth landing was conducted at a village near the Cambodian border. As ARVN approached the village, they came under fire by around 150 Viet Cong in prepared defensive positions. During the firefight, the guerillas panicked and ran. Shortly after, the Air Force spotted the Viet Cong crossing the open paddy nearby. South Vietnamese aircraft strafed the enemy – some fleeing in sampans – with machine gun, cannon, and rocket fire. They even dropped a canister of napalm which killed an entire group of Viet Cong. The ARVN troops on the ground also brought fire on the exposed insurgents. The division's reserves were called in to cut off the Viet Cong's withdrawal, but they were prevented from carrying out their orders by the 10<sup>th</sup> regiment – the troops who had established contact with the enemy – because they did not want to share the

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<sup>220</sup> ORLL 21, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

victory. This infuriated the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's adviser Colonel John Paul Vann who believed they had allowed the Viet Cong to escape. The government claimed it killed 131 guerillas in the battle, but Vann contended that the enemy killed in action did not exceed ninety.<sup>221</sup>

Communist records indicate the Vann's judgement of the battle is incorrect. An intercepted Viet Cong radio broadcast that took place shortly after the battle indicates that they were even more infuriated by its outcome than Vann. The broadcast chastised the guerilla commanders for allowing such a significant defeat. The insurgents also admitted more than one hundred killed in action – closer to ARVN's estimation of the battle than that of Col. Vann.<sup>222</sup> A recently published Viet Cong official history revealed that they suffered 141 men killed in the battle – exceeding ARVN's claim.<sup>223</sup> Hindsight reveals that ARVN scored a major victory in a Viet Cong stronghold. This was largely the result of good intelligence. Local peasants had notified the government of the guerillas' location which they used to great effect.<sup>224</sup> Actionable intelligence is a key indicator of the support of the population in a counterinsurgency campaign suggesting that ARVN was not just winning battles, but also extending government control over the countryside. Furthermore, ARVN's increased mobility and firepower as a result of American air support proved decisive in the battle. American aid continued to prove that it had turned the tide of the war in the South's favor. One of the North's official histories recognized this fact writing, "our people's war forces were unable to stop the enemy's helicopter-

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<sup>221</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 82-89.

<sup>222</sup> Robert Trumbull, "Loss in 3-Day Clash Worries Vietcong," *New York Times*, August 5, 1962.

<sup>223</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 168.

<sup>224</sup> Trumbull, "Loss in 3-Day Clash."

borne and armored personnel carrier assaults, and so [we] became confused and hesitant, and our losses increased ... many units were forced to disperse.”<sup>225</sup>

In late August ARVN carried out a major four phase operation in the Mekong Delta. Operation Binh Tay took place from 15 to 30 August and involved five infantry battalions, two Airborne battalions, a Marine battalion, two Ranger companies, and a company of M113 APCs. Their objective was to destroy any Viet Cong in the area of operations by carrying out numerous small targets of opportunity attacks against the enemy. Good intelligence was necessary for the operation to be successful. For the first several days of the operation, the Rangers dressed in civilian clothes turning the Viet Cong’s tactic of blending in with the population against them. The Rangers managed to successfully kill or capture several unsuspecting guerillas this way.<sup>226</sup> At one point in the battle the Air Force caught 125 Viet Cong in the open and killed them in a strafing attack.<sup>227</sup> The operation was considered a major success. The South Vietnamese killed 497 Viet Cong and captured 433 eliminating two Viet Cong battalions.<sup>228</sup> Their own casualties were light with only thirteen men killed in action and twenty-eight wounded.<sup>229</sup> Air power was essential to the ARVN victory, accounting for most of the damage dealt to the enemy, but intelligent use of deception by the Rangers played an important role as well.

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<sup>225</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 169.

<sup>226</sup> ORLL 23, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>227</sup> “South Vietnam Says Troops Killed 214 Reds in Drive,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1962.

<sup>228</sup> Jacques Nevard, “Drive in Vietnam Wins Wide Gains,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1962; ORLL 23, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned.

<sup>229</sup> ORLL 23, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472.

American air support did not always guarantee victory. Coordinating air support with ground operations was difficult and poor communications could lead to inaccurate and therefore ineffective strikes. Operation Lam Son II in I Corps on 30 August demonstrates this fact. The operation was an air assault against the 90th Viet Cong Battalion by two hundred Rangers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Battalion and two hundred Vietnamese Special Forces.<sup>230</sup> The Air Force carried out an air strike to cover ARVN's landing at 0700, but fog delayed the helicopters landing for two hours eliminating the element of surprise and allowing the Viet Cong to deliver heavy fire onto the landing zones with a .30 caliber machine gun.<sup>231</sup> In the landing, one helicopter was hit and abandoned which forced the Air Force to destroy it to prevent it falling into enemy hands.<sup>232</sup> Once the Rangers landed, they quickly took their objective, a Viet Cong Command Post. In the fighting, the ARVN troops killed fifty-three Viet Cong, including their battalion commander, while suffering eleven of their own killed in action.<sup>233</sup> During the withdrawal there was more confusion because the withdrawal plan was changed without notice. As a result, another helicopter was shot down and needed to be destroyed.<sup>234</sup> The air force found no good targets, but the skill of South Vietnam's elite Rangers and Special Forces made the difference and scored a significant victory.<sup>235</sup> At this point in the war, effective airpower was still the key to victory, but ARVN was showing clear signs of improvement. The Rangers were clearly capable of operating

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<sup>230</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 37; ORLL 24, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>231</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 41-42; ORLL 24, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned.

<sup>232</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 43.

<sup>233</sup> ORLL 24, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned.

<sup>234</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 43.

<sup>235</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 48.

independently against the Viet Cong and Operation Lam Son II demonstrates ARVN's growing ability to win battles through aggressive offensive action.

From August to September, ARVN's 7<sup>th</sup> Division carried out six straight operations against the Viet Cong in which they killed more than one hundred enemies.<sup>236</sup> The most impressive of these victories came on 18 September near the village of An Hu in the Plain of Reeds, a Viet Cong stronghold.<sup>237</sup> Colonel Cao's men once again hunted the 502<sup>nd</sup> Viet Cong Battalion. The attacking force was spearheaded by a company of M113 armored personnel carriers led by Captain Ly Tong Ba. Captain Ba described this period as such, "on our side it was always 'Attack! Attack!'"<sup>238</sup> Attack is exactly what he did. As Ba's APCs advanced through the paddies, the Viet Cong decided to put up a fight. The guerillas quickly realized their gun fire was ineffective against the armor of the carriers. Ba's men made good use of their carrier's .50 caliber machine guns shooting any insurgents who tried to flee. Some attempted to hide in the water of the paddies, but the wake caused by the carriers revealed them to Ba's men. When the drivers spotted a guerilla, they charged the enemy crushing some Viet Cong under their tracks. It was the biggest victory for ARVN so far, with 158 Viet Cong killed in action and sixty more captured.<sup>239</sup> Ba claimed that his men won because the enemy did not anticipate the strength of their armor.<sup>240</sup> It could equally be claimed that ARVN won because the Viet Cong did not anticipate their firepower.

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<sup>236</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 93.

<sup>237</sup> David Halberstam, "South Vietnamese Inflict a Major Defeat on Reds," *New York Times*, September 19, 1962.

<sup>238</sup> Ly Tong Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua* (Westminster, CA: Tu-Quynh, 2005), 70.

<sup>239</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 93-96.

<sup>240</sup> Ly Tong Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 78.

This operation shows most clearly the positive affect the American advisory effort had on the South's war effort. American made M113s were the difference in this fight and American support had become the difference in the war. Since America's increased aid to South Vietnam in the start of the year, ARVN had reversed the situation in Vietnam. ARVN was besting the Viet Cong on the field of battle. They were keeping the Viet Cong off balance and controlling the initiative, which enabled the government to maintain and spread its authority over the country which is what ARVN needed to do in order to win the war.

On 5 October, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division found itself in an unfamiliar position. It suffered ARVN's most serious defeat of the year so far. A company of Rangers air assaulted into the Plain of Reeds hunting the 514<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Battalion. As the Rangers crossed an open paddy, they came under fire from Viet Cong arrayed along a dike. They had no cover, but some of the Rangers still attempted to flank the Viet Cong. Caught in the open the Rangers were quickly slaughtered suffering twenty men killed in action and forty wounded. Reinforcements arrived forcing the guerillas to withdraw. As the Viet Cong withdrew ARVN suffered four more casualties.<sup>241</sup> It was a significant defeat for ARVN, some of their best soldiers had been killed. Poor terrain was the decisive factor in ARVN's defeat giving them little cover from enemy fire.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Division adviser Col. John Paul Vann claimed that ARVN suffered a far more significant setback after the battle. He alleged that President Diem ordered the Division commander Col. Huynh Van Cao to avoid further casualties in order to avoid a

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<sup>241</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 118-119.

coup. Vann asserts that this led Cao to carry out pointless operations and cut the Americans out of operational planning.<sup>242</sup> The evidence does not support Vann's claim of a halt in operations. Moyer points out that in the weeks after the battle, ARVN casualties actually increased and that the American embassy explained these casualties as a result of the "increasing aggressiveness of [government] units in small actions."<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, contemporary sources reveal that the 7<sup>th</sup> Division was still out conducting operations against the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta. On 14 November, reporter Richard Tregaskis met Col. Vann at the 7<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters. Vann explained the plan of an ongoing operation in detail suggesting that the Vietnamese had not cut the Americans out of the planning. The government troops were attempting to encircle a group of suspected Viet Cong by air. During the operation, Tregaskis observed several firefights from a helicopter and spotted two groups of black clad Viet Cong prisoners haphazardly carrying a wounded comrade.<sup>244</sup> At the time, Vann reported that nine guerillas were killed in the fighting and fifteen taken prisoner.<sup>245</sup> Although this does not approach the numbers put up in some 7<sup>th</sup> Division operations it clearly supports the conclusion that ARVN was still aggressively engaging the Viet Cong.

From 11 to 19 October, ARVN carried out Operation Morning Star hunting insurgents in Tay Ninh Province on the border with Cambodia – a Viet Cong stronghold.<sup>246</sup> Five thousand troops of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions turned up few results on

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<sup>242</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 121-122.

<sup>243</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 177.

<sup>244</sup> Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 180-188.

<sup>245</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 217.

<sup>246</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Attack is Called a Failure," *New York Times*, October 20, 1962.



the first day but on the second day a group of guerillas were spotted in a sampan. An air strike was called on them killing thirty-seven insurgents. Four ARVN troopers were killed in an ambush on the same day.<sup>247</sup> For most of the rest of the operation there was little action as the Viet Cong eluded ARVN by hiding in tunnels and caves. However, as ARVN conducted its withdrawal the Viet Cong decided to counterattack. For the first time in the Vietnam War, the Huey helicopter was called into action killing twenty-five of the insurgents with its machine gun.<sup>248</sup> ARVN once again used the advantage of American air power to incredible success. They managed to win an important victory in a key Viet Cong area and stayed on the offensive keeping their enemy off balance.

In a counterinsurgency, it is impossible to win massive victories in every battle but gaining the advantage in the slow grind of guerilla warfare is essential to victory. ARVN demonstrated this ability in an operation that began on 15 October in I Corps. The 18<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion conducted a sweep operation against Viet Cong in the area. Most of the guerillas ran at the sight of the Ranger's helicopters approaching but a few fired on them from a nearby hill. The Rangers returned and killed two insurgents. Air strikes pounded the hill, but the Viet Cong pulled out. The ranges advanced carefully on a nearby village to avoid booby traps. More Rangers landed nearby where they killed another guerilla in a firefight. The two companies met up and stayed in the area for a few days to little effect. On the third day of the operation, they attempted to capture a guerilla, but he ran away after a fist fight forcing them to shoot him.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> David Halberstam, Saigon Reports 37 Vietnam Reds Slain in Drive," *New York Times*, October 13, 1962.

<sup>248</sup> Halberstam, "Vietnamese Attack."

<sup>249</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 57-60.

On 25 November, two battalions of Viet Cong attacked Phuoc Chia Outpost which was defended by one hundred ARVN soldiers. Nearly one thousand guerrillas charged the outpost early in the morning, but the approaches to the outpost were already ranged and numbered. As such the advancing guerillas were decimated by devastating artillery fire. The insurgents had set off a trip flare when the attack began, bringing the ARVN defenders into action. As the Viet Cong approached the barbed wire perimeter, they also came under intense machine gun and small arms fire which halted their advance. One ARVN soldier manning a machine gun killed forty guerillas who were charging his position. At this point, ARVN counterattacked, drove back the Viet Cong, and forced them to retreat after a bloody three-hour battle. Both insurgent battalion commanders were killed along with 122 other Viet Cong. ARVN suffered only ten wounded. They had been warned about the attack by friendly locals and receiving good intelligence from the population is key to any successful counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>250</sup> This battle demonstrates that ARVN was making important gains in that direction. The American advisers praised ARVN's performance saying that the battle was, "entirely a Vietnamese victory. The Vietnamese fought as they had been trained to fight and they won not because they had helicopters or fighter planes, but because they were well prepared and fought well."<sup>251</sup> ARVN had been outnumbered at the start of the battle and won one of their most decisive victories to date. The battle for Phuoc Chia Outpost demonstrates ARVN's increasing ability to win victories independent of American air support especially when on the defensive.

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<sup>250</sup> Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, 224-230.

<sup>251</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnam Heartened by Major Victory Over Reds," *New York Times*, November 27, 1962.

ARVN finished the year with a push into the previously uncontested Viet Cong stronghold known as War Zone D near Saigon. The push began on 20 November when five hundred Rangers parachuted into the guerilla base.<sup>252</sup> This first phase called Operation Boondodge was a planned three-week campaign that was halted after only two. Boondodge achieved mediocre results killing on three insurgents as they avoided detection by hiding in tunnels and caves.<sup>253</sup> Despite this setback, ARVN continued the offensive with an intense bombing campaign. One airstrike killed at least ten Viet Cong judging by the number of fresh graves ARVN found. In the last three weeks of the year, ARVN killed sixty-two Viet Cong in War Zone D and managed to capture ten guerillas.<sup>254</sup> It was another impressive victory in an area of enemy strength. ARVN finished the year by putting pressure onto the enemy and forcing them on the defensive.

Clearly 1962, was a momentous year for ARVN. In 1961, they were on the defensive and feared being completely overrun. The increase in American aid had turned the tide of the war, as access to helicopters, attack aircraft, and armored personnel carriers gave ARVN troops increased firepower and mobility. Throughout the year, these troops took full advantage of their new capabilities. ARVN took the initiative from the Viet Cong and went on the offensive. They struck at key guerilla strongholds and worked to secure and maintain government control in the countryside. Most importantly they succeeded in every armed forces' central mission – to defeat their nation's enemies in combat. Throughout the year of the tiger ARVN demonstrated its ability to defeat the

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<sup>252</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 156.

<sup>253</sup> David Halberstam, "Saigon Ends Push in Key Red Region," *New York Times*, December 4, 1962.

<sup>254</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 156.

Viet Cong on the field of battle. However, the Viet Cong were not going to give up without a fight. Would 1963 be a year of Ap Bacs or would ARVN be able to continue its success on the battlefield?

## CHAPTER IV – THE YEAR OF THE CAT: 1963

1962 was a year of stunning success for ARVN. Throughout South Vietnam, ARVN won impressive victories against the Viet Cong, and with American air support, they reversed the losing trend of previous years. However, the Vietnam War was far from finished, and in 1963, the intensity of the fighting increased significantly. The year began with the Battle of Ap Bac in which ARVN was dealt a heavy blow. For many historians – like John Nagl, Gregory Daddis, and David Palmer – ARVN’s performance at Ap Bac was seen as representative of their performance throughout the early period of the war.<sup>255</sup> However, they are overlooking ARVN’s many successes. These successes include the months long ARVN Ranger campaign into the communist stronghold of War Zone D, the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s July victory against the guerilla forces that had mauled it at Ap Bac, and the Vietnamese Marines stunning September Victory at Dam Doi. The latter two battles closely resembled Ap Bac with ARVN troops assaulting dug-in Viet Cong defenders over open rice paddies, except in these two cases ARVN won conclusively. In 1963, despite some setbacks, ARVN continued to aggressively fight the enemy and won significant victories that brought South Vietnam closer to victory.

The first few days of the new year were a hectic time in South Vietnam. In the shadow of Ap Bac, several other important battles took place in which ARVN fought well despite sometimes overwhelming odds. These battles reveal that even as ARVN’s 7<sup>th</sup> Division was struggling in the rice paddies, South Vietnam’s soldiers were more than a match for the Viet Cong. On 2 January 1963, as the fighting raged at Ap Bac, ARVN

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<sup>255</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 55-56; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 131-136; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 37-51.

launched a major operation in Tay Ninh Province near the border of Cambodia that had priority on all air support in the country.<sup>256</sup> Their objective was the headquarters of the National Liberation Front guarded by some one thousand guerillas, the location of which was based on confirmed intelligence that the military received from a Viet Cong prisoner of war.<sup>257</sup> An hour before the operation was scheduled to begin, air support began bombarding the insurgent headquarters. At H-hour, 1,250 paratroopers dropped onto the battlefield while a battalion of Rangers flew in by helicopter.<sup>258</sup> ARVN's best troops fanned out to demolish the enemy main base killing seventy-six insurgents while taking only nine casualties.<sup>259</sup> Throughout the fight, the bombing of NLF headquarters was intense as twenty-six AD-6 Skyraiders, sixteen B-26 Marauders, and twenty-four T-28 Trojans provided "splendid" air support that estimates from prisoners claim killed between four hundred and one thousand Viet Cong.<sup>260</sup> The exact number does not matter as much as the fact that ARVN dealt a devastating blow against the Viet Cong at Tay Ninh – even greater than the blow dealt against them at Ap Bac. The battle illustrates that American air power continued to give South Vietnam a decided edge on the battlefield unlike at Ap Bac where a lack of air support contributed to disaster. Furthermore, ARVN conducted a complex airborne assault, a difficult operation for any military, with great success demonstrating that their poor performance at Ap Bac was far from representative of the entire war during 1963.

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<sup>256</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 156.

<sup>257</sup> CINCPAC to MACV, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 - 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>258</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 156.

<sup>259</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 157.

<sup>260</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 157.

A day later, 3 January, the Vietnamese Navy and Marines began their “Wave of Affection” campaign to reoccupy and pacify the Nam Can area in the Viet Cong stronghold of the Ca Mau Peninsula, the southernmost tip of Vietnam.<sup>261</sup> It was the largest Navy operation of the war so far, with numerous landing craft, gunboats, and patrol craft complemented by two battalions of Marines – the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> – and a battery of 75mm Howitzers.<sup>262</sup> The operations were led by Navy Captain Ho Tan Quyen. The plan called for a one-month joint Navy-Marines campaign to secure the area followed by the construction of new bases from which to expand government control. At 0630, the Marines began landing on the shore of the Man Can river while the Navy provided covering fire with their 76mm guns, which obliterated the enemy’s wooden bunkers. One boat killed three Viet Cong that were spotted nearby carrying weapons.<sup>263</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of Sea Tigers, as the Marines were called, began to secure the beachhead which prompted the guerillas to flee after firing a few shots. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion chased the enemy while the howitzer battery lumbered up to provide fire support to their comrades.<sup>264</sup> The hunt for the fleeing guerillas went slowly in the swampy terrain, and the Marines engaged the Viet Cong in only a few small skirmishes capturing five prisoners.<sup>265</sup>

On 4 January, the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Battalion landed on a beach on the eastern side of the Peninsula that had already been secured by Navy frogmen.<sup>266</sup> The landing was

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<sup>261</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 34.

<sup>262</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 35.

<sup>263</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 36.

<sup>264</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 36.

<sup>265</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 37.

<sup>266</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 38.

covered by monitors with 40mm guns. Once on the ground, the Marines employed a pincer movement to trap the Viet Cong. The going was slow in the difficult terrain, but the Marines managed to kill or capture an unspecified number of guerillas.<sup>267</sup> The Marines and Navy worked to win the support of the population by respecting their property and not eating a pig that they had found which might belong to a civilian, as well as by providing medical care to the locals.<sup>268</sup> Later in the campaign, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which had arrived as reinforcements, killed five insurgents in a firefight after one of their landing craft was struck by a 75mm recoilless rifle round.<sup>269</sup> The Wave of Affection campaign demonstrated that the Marines were capable of carrying out successful amphibious assaults, considered the most difficult of military operations, and aggressively pursuing the enemy through difficult terrain. The operation highlighted both their competence and their fighting spirit which further illustrates that the failures at Ap Bac were not indicative of the fighting abilities of the entire Vietnamese military.

On 3 January, the American Special Forces run militia training camp at Plei Mrong was assaulted by forty Viet Cong who were let through the barbed wire defenses by eleven insurgent sympathizer trainees.<sup>270</sup> The infiltrators opened fire on the defenders and tossed grenades and TNT into their tents inflicting heavy casualties. The local Montagnard Strike Force and loyal trainees manned the trenches and defended what was left of the compound. Four Green Berets occupied an inoperable mortar pit holding off multiple waves of Viet Cong attackers, some armed with bangalore torpedoes. ARVN Lt.

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<sup>267</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 38.

<sup>268</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 40.

<sup>269</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 41.

<sup>270</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietcong Group Was Helped by a Trojan Horse," *New York Times*, January 23, 1963.



Bao helped call in artillery support from nearby ARVN units to knock out an enemy recoilless rifle. At 0600, the guerillas withdrew having only partially overrun the camp. In the end twenty-nine defenders lay dead, seventy-three were missing, and thirty-eight were wounded.<sup>271</sup> However, nearly fifty of the attackers had also been killed in action.<sup>272</sup> With no air support and facing an enemy with the element of surprise that had already gotten past their defenses, the fact that the Americans and South Vietnamese managed to hold onto Plei Mrong seemed to be almost a miracle. In reality, it was a testament to their determination and further proof that ARVN could out fight the Viet Cong, even in the most challenging circumstances. In light of the Airborne's success at Tay Ninh, the Marines skill on the Ca Mau Peninsula, and the tenacity of the Plei Mrong defenders the struggles of ARVN at Ap Bac look more like an aberration of ARVN combat performance than the norm.

At the start of 1963, America and South Vietnam approved their strategy for winning the Vietnam War – the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN). The goal of the strategy was for South Vietnam to be strong enough to defend itself by the end of 1965. This was to be accomplished through the Strategic Hamlet Program and the National Campaign Plan (NCP). The Strategic Hamlet Program had begun in 1962 and was designed to isolate the Viet Cong from the population by resettling them into fortified, government-controlled hamlets – that is local communities occupied by government troops, usually militia, and administered by government officials. Government control denied the insurgents access to the intelligence, recruits, food, and

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<sup>271</sup> Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), 56-57.

<sup>272</sup> Halberstam, "Vietcong Group."

shelter that they needed from the population in order to survive.<sup>273</sup> By cutting off the Viet Cong's main source of support, ARVN believed that they could cause the insurgency to collapse.<sup>274</sup>

The Vietnamese people, especially in the Delta, were closely tied to the land. As a result, the resettlement aspect of the Strategic Hamlet Program caused serious public outrage. The Diem regime understood that the public was angry with resettlement, but they believed that it was necessary in order to secure the hamlets. Most Vietnamese hamlets in the Delta were spread out, making organized defense difficult. Resettlement allowed the creation of more easily defensible closely constructed hamlets which was necessary in order to accomplish the goal of separating the Viet Cong from the population.<sup>275</sup> The government accepted the anger in order to quickly complete this primary objective. Furthermore, the administration believed that over time improvements brought about by civic and economic programs would make the population forget their anger at resettlement and win over their support.<sup>276</sup> Despite starting in 1962, the Strategic Hamlet Program played only a small role in the fighting that year. Starting in 1963, the Viet Cong launched an aggressive effort to destroy the strategic hamlets. ARVN's success in defending them was key to their success in the year of the cat.

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<sup>273</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, Document 18.

<sup>274</sup> Report on Visit to Delta Provinces June – August 1963, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 - 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>275</sup> Hamlets in the Central Highlands and Coastal regions of South Vietnam were generally more closely constructed. As a result, resettlement did not always take place in these areas. The peasants simply built fortifications around their hamlets. This meant that there was far less anger at the Strategic Hamlet Program in these areas than in the Delta which likely contributed to the Program's success in I and II Corps. Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 230.

<sup>276</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 230.

The NCP was the military complement to the Strategic Hamlet Program. It directed ARVN to launch offensives against the Viet Cong – destroying them whenever possible – in order to apply continuous pressure on guerilla-controlled areas and to expand government control into new areas.<sup>277</sup> In 1963, ARVN executed the NCP well – taking the fight to the heart of the enemy and bringing an element of government rule to places it had never been before. The Wave of Affection campaign was a perfect example of the kind of operation called for by the NCP.

During the first five months of 1963, ARVN conducted a series of operations that sought to implement the National Campaign Plan in a key Viet Cong Stronghold – War Zone D. The ARVN Rangers established a government footprint in the area and put constant pressure on the guerillas. It was a continuation of ARVN's forays into War Zone D in 1962. The campaign began on 3 January 1963 with the start of the Part Two of Phase III of Operation Holiday which lasted until 9 January. Nine Ranger companies of the Phouc-Binh-Thanh Special Zone (PBTSZ) led by Lt. Col. Dien air assaulted into War Zone D in three columns on the hunt for a Viet Cong Regiment.<sup>278</sup> The landing zone was initially contested, but the Rangers quickly secured it. The next six days were spent on reconnaissance missions, raids, and ambushes in thick jungle where quick movement was impossible while the nights were filled with guerilla probes on the Ranger's defenses.<sup>279</sup>

During Operation Holiday two main engagements with the enemy took place. In the first, one platoon of the 30<sup>th</sup> Special Battalion led by Capt. Cang stumbled upon the

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<sup>277</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, Document 18.

<sup>278</sup> After Action Report Operation Holiday, Nulsen Collection, Vietnam Virtual Archive, 1.

<sup>279</sup> Operation Holiday, Nulsen Collection, 2.

defenses of a Viet Cong field hospital. From ten meters away, an enemy machine gun ripped into the Rangers killing four of them including Capt. Cang. The surviving Rangers returned fire and fell back to regroup. Several minutes later, they returned to the hospital to retrieve their dead and wounded. A captured occupant of the hospital claimed that the guerillas had also withdrawn as soon as the fighting started and claimed that thirty-five of them had been killed in the fight, though this was likely an exaggeration.<sup>280</sup> The other main engagement happened on 4 January where some of the Rangers fought an enemy company. The casualties were light on both sides. The Rangers suffered one dead and seven wounded while managing to kill twelve insurgents.<sup>281</sup>

While the casualty figures of Operation Holiday were not spectacular, it had accomplished the objectives set by the NCP. The Rangers applied continuous pressure on the Viet Cong of War Zone D which prevented the enemy from gaining the initiative. Every moment the guerillas spent withdrawing from contact with the Rangers or probing their defenses were lost opportunities to disrupt the Strategic Hamlet Program. Through their operations deep in enemy territory, ARVN turned the guerillas advantage of running away against them. For the Viet Cong, retreat no longer represented living to fight another day. It became a waste of time in which more and more of the population came under government control in the strategic hamlets denying the insurgents their most valuable resource – the population.

In February, ARVN kept the pressure up on the Viet Cong of War Zone D by launching Operation Hardtimes I. From 2 to 16 February, the PBTSZ Rangers conducted

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<sup>280</sup> Operation Holiday, Nulsen Collection, 5-6.

<sup>281</sup> Operation Holiday, Nulsen Collection, 6.

what they considered the longest and most successful operation in War Zone D so far. The Rangers went in led by a Viet Cong defector who said he would lead them to the headquarters of Zone D. Early in the operation, the Rangers bivouacked before nightfall alerting the Viet Cong to their location. When they moved out the next morning, they were ambushed resulting in nine men killed and five wounded.<sup>282</sup> The commander was replaced by Lt. Col. Dien who took measures to avoid further ambushes, like not stopping before nightfall and moving out before dawn, so it would be more difficult for the guerillas to ascertain their location. Movement in the jungle was slow and the Rangers had to use elephant paths to get through the thickest portions. On the fourth day of the operation, the lead element spotted an insurgent outpost. Col. Dien realized that attacking it might alert the headquarters they were hunting, but he decided, after consulting his adviser Major Charles Nulsen, to take the target of opportunity while he had the element of surprise.<sup>283</sup> The Rangers began their assault at 0600 and overran the entire outpost in fifteen minutes, but were disappointed when they counted one body.<sup>284</sup>

Realizing their opportunity to attack the enemy headquarters was fading, the Rangers moved out for their primary objective covering four kilometers by 1000. The lead element of the column came under enemy fire from the Viet Cong War Zone D HQ, and the rest of the Rangers double-timed into action. The next half hour was a chaotic maelstrom of constant fire. The Rangers pushed through the enemy base capturing two prisoners – one wounded and one who had been looking for an opportunity to defect. The prisoners revealed that the Rangers had found the HQ, but it had been evacuated, and

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<sup>282</sup> Ranger Operations in War Zone D, Nulsen Collection, Vietnam Virtual Archive, 10.

<sup>283</sup> Ranger Operations in War Zone D, Nulsen Collection, 11.

<sup>284</sup> Ranger Operations in War Zone D, Nulsen Collection, 12.

they were part of a security platoon that stayed behind to fight a delaying action.<sup>285</sup> The wounded prisoner succumbed to his injuries shortly after, but the defector went on to provide valuable intelligence on Zone D. Although the Rangers did not manage to wipe out the guerillas at the HQ, they came away with an even more valuable prize: a complete roster of the all the guerillas in War Zone D and a definitive list of the enemy units stationed there.<sup>286</sup> Their pressure on the Viet Cong in Zone D disrupted the enemy HQ's ability to plan operations to dismantle the government's strategic hamlets in III Corps. The Rangers also set themselves up with actionable intelligence they could use to inflict greater blows against the enemy in the future.

On 24 February, the PBTSZ Rangers charged back into War Zone D for an operation that lasted until 10 March – Hardtimes II. Two companies of Special Forces accompanied the eleven Ranger companies on this mission, while two more companies of Rangers and a Mechanized company stood by as reinforcements.<sup>287</sup> The Rangers made their initial contact with the Viet Cong on 26 February when Column C spotted two sampans carrying the enemy down a river. The Rangers opened fire killing all eleven of the enemy and sinking both sampans.<sup>288</sup> The next day Column B's defensive perimeter was infiltrated by a lone guerilla who opened fire with a submachine gun. The guerilla was quickly killed and only managed to wound three Rangers.<sup>289</sup> On 28 February, eight guerillas ambushed Column A, but they were easily dispatched and left behind a lone

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<sup>285</sup> Ranger Operations in War Zone D, Nulsen Collection, 12.

<sup>286</sup> Ranger Operations in War Zone D, Nulsen Collection, 13.

<sup>287</sup> After Action Report Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, Vietnam Virtual Archive, 1-2.

<sup>288</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 4.

<sup>289</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 3.

dead comrade who was killed when he was hit by a M-79 grenade launcher.<sup>290</sup> The Rangers suffered two wounded in the ambush.<sup>291</sup> On 2 March, the Viet Cong wounded six Rangers and an American adviser by tossing a grenade into a river where they were bathing.<sup>292</sup>

Three days later, on 5 March the Rangers returned to the site of the hospital they discovered in Operation Holiday. They found it abandoned, but they discovered a nearby enemy camp of twenty-five buildings while searching the area. During the search, one Ranger was wounded by a sniper.<sup>293</sup> Their planning for the attack on the base took too long. When they launched the assault on 7 March, an AD-6 Skyraider destroyed seventeen of the buildings, but there were no Viet Cong to be found.<sup>294</sup> Operation Hardtimes II gives insight into the broader course of the war in 1963 in which most engagements were minor and the results were meager. Despite this, ARVN still had the upper hand suffering three dead to the Viet Cong's thirteen dead.<sup>295</sup> As the operation wound down, the Rangers had a growing feeling that the Viet Cong would not continue to put up with their infiltrations for much longer.<sup>296</sup> The guerillas needed to turn their attention to the hamlets, and to do that, they would need to defeat ARVN in battle.

On 25 March, ARVN won a major victory against the Viet Cong in the area. This time, the guerillas faced two battalions of paratroopers from the Airborne Division with armored personnel carrier support. The ARVN troops were searching for the location of a

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<sup>290</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 2, 8.

<sup>291</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 2.

<sup>292</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 2.

<sup>293</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 4.

<sup>294</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 5.

<sup>295</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 7.

<sup>296</sup> Hardtimes II, Nulsen Collection, 6.

major Viet Cong arms factory which they had learned about from a defector. Some of the paratroopers jumped into the area of operations while others were flown in by helicopter. As ARVN pushed for the factory, the guerillas were taken by surprise losing a confirmed twenty-five men killed in action. When ARVN took the arms factory, it captured thirty tons of copper and iron ore and all the factory equipment.<sup>297</sup> By dealing such a solid defeat to the Viet Cong, ARVN kept the initiative and discouraged them from going on the offensive. In light of their success, ARVN decided to ratchet up the pressure on the Viet Cong in Zone D.

On 6 April, the PBTSZ Rangers moved into War Zone D to set up a base with an airstrip in the heart of enemy territory in an operation called Hardtimes III. The operation lasted for nearly two months. Lt. Col. Dien had at his disposal two battalions of Rangers and two platoons of armor – one of M113s and one of M114s – plus a mortar platoon and an engineer battalion to build the base and airstrip.<sup>298</sup> The Rangers set up their base next to a bridge over the Rang Rang River. The mortar platoon set up inside the defenses to provide supporting fire and the Rangers spent their days patrolling the perimeter. On the night of 11 April, they made first contact with the enemy when the 316<sup>th</sup> Ranger Company ambushed and killed two Viet Cong.<sup>299</sup> On 14 April, the Rangers suffered their first casualty when a sniper wounded an engineer. Four days later, two Ranger companies ran into a mine-initiated ambush near the airstrip, but a quick reaction by the M114s broke the ambush. Only three Rangers were wounded. Two more Viet Cong ambushes on the same day wounded a measly eight ARVN soldiers. On 25 April, the 316<sup>th</sup> Ranger

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<sup>297</sup> “Vietnam Seizes Big Arms Plant,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1963.

<sup>298</sup> After Action Report Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, Vietnam Virtual Archive, 1.

<sup>299</sup> Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, 2.



Company killed another guerilla in a small skirmish.<sup>300</sup> For the rest of the operation there was only intermittent skirmishing interspersed with the occasional mine that wounded a few ARVN every few days.<sup>301</sup> The operation was far from perfect. The bases defenses were poorly set up and vulnerable to attack and the logistics and communications situation at the base was insufficient.<sup>302</sup> Despite these shortcomings, ARVN scored a major success. They determined that their months of harassment had forced the Viet Cong to abandon War Zone D.<sup>303</sup> The Rangers dedication to implementing the NCP in Zone D kept pressure on the Viet Cong for five months, preventing them from mounting attacks to dismantle strategic hamlets in the area and forcing them to abandon a key base. In doing so, the Rangers demonstrated that the South Vietnamese were making steady progress toward accomplishing their objective of separating the Viet Cong from their base of support in the population.

On 26 July, ARVN decided to pull out of the base at Rang Rang. When they did, they left behind eight hundred mines which killed several Viet Cong who tried to dig them up. The Americans were upset that the South Vietnamese had abandoned the base to the guerillas who preceded to blow up the bridge over the Rang Rang River and tear up the airstrip. However, ARVN reasoned that the base would be too difficult to supply during the rainy season.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, there was no point wasting the Rangers' combat power on an area the Viet Cong had abandoned. The NCP called for applying continuous pressure against the enemy. Strategically, pulling out of Rang Rang was the right call.

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<sup>300</sup> Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, 3.

<sup>301</sup> Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, 4.

<sup>302</sup> Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, 5, 11.

<sup>303</sup> Hardtimes III, Nulsen Collection, 6.

<sup>304</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Give Up Base in Reds' Area," *New York Times*, July 27, 1963.

While the Rangers were busy disrupting the Viet Cong in War Zone D, the war continued unabated in the rest of the country. On 28 January, ARVN launched Operation Loi Phong, forty kilometers south of Saigon, to remove civilians from guerilla control and resettle them in strategic hamlets.<sup>305</sup> When the operation began, one thousand four hundred paratroopers dropped into the area of operations while an element of Rangers went in by truck.<sup>306</sup> The Viet Cong were aware of the operation beforehand and tried to flee.<sup>307</sup> Two paratroopers were killed in action – one during the jump and one by a mine. The paratroopers also sustained sixteen injuries from the jump. They managed to kill a lone guerilla and captured an impressive eighty-four prisoners, including two defectors.<sup>308</sup> However, the most important result of the operation was that they successfully resettled the civilians.<sup>309</sup> In doing so, the paratroopers continued to make progress towards the National Campaign Plan's objective of a government controlled South Vietnam by expanding the government presence into new areas.

Ambushes were the most effective operation for the Viet Cong when combating ARVN. In 1963, they still rarely defeated ARVN regulars in a conventional fight. On February 6, near Thoi Binh village in the Ca Mau peninsula, three companies of South Vietnamese militia were searching for Viet Cong in a thick forest. During the patrol, three hundred guerillas ambushed the militiamen pinning down the first two companies while mauling the third. Before the insurgents withdrew, they killed thirty-four of the

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<sup>305</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 60,64.

<sup>306</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 62.

<sup>307</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 60.

<sup>308</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 63.

<sup>309</sup> Martin, *Project CHECO*, 64.

militiamen, wounded twenty-seven, and captured twenty-two firearms.<sup>310</sup> Ambushes gave the Viet Cong a serious tactical advantage against ARVN – it afforded them the element of surprise. They could do significant damage to the enemy before they were even able to respond. However, ambushes were not a guarantee of success and they could end negatively for the attackers, especially when ARVN was able to make use of its superior firepower.

An ambush that happened on the same day as the Thoi Binh ambush illustrates this point. Marine landing craft were floating down a river when the Viet Cong detonated two mines both of which sunk a South Vietnamese boat. A group of Marines in speedboats attacked the Viet Cong ambush position, killing twenty-five guerillas while only losing seven of their own.<sup>311</sup> Although ambushes presented a great opportunity for the Viet Cong to win victories against ARVN they came with risks. They also gave ARVN units an opportunity to fight the Viet Cong. Ambushes tended to be more successful against the poorly trained militia, but as the Marines demonstrated they were far more difficult against ARVN's elite units.

Another ambush near the village of Binh Chanh in March illustrates this point. A rifle platoon of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine battalion was patrolling strategic hamlets 30km north of Saigon with a section of three M24 light tanks. The lead element ran into a mine setting off a flurry of small arms fire from sixty to one hundred guerillas. The rest of the platoon encircled the ambush site as the insurgents withdrew. The M24 tanks pursued the insurgents but they managed to escape. The Viet Cong only managed to kill five Marines

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<sup>310</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnam Patrol is Wiped Out by Guerilla Ambush in Forest," *New York Times*, February 7, 1963.

<sup>311</sup> Halberstam, "Vietnam Patrol."

in the fight while leaving behind four bodies of their own. Positively for ARVN, the local villagers sheltered and cared for their wounded, suggesting that they had popular support in the area.<sup>312</sup> While the Marines were unable to turn the ambush into a clear victory, they did manage to blunt its effectiveness through a quick and aggressive reaction.

During an ambush in Tay Ninh province on 15 April, the Viet Cong scored what may have been their most impressive victory of the year. They successfully ambushed a company of paratroopers from the elite Airborne Brigade who were investigating a suspected guerilla training camp. In the firefight the element of surprise proved decisive as the Viet Cong inflicted serious casualties on the Airborne company before they were able to effectively respond. The insurgents managed to kill at least eighteen paratroopers and wounded twenty-seven more.<sup>313</sup> Another estimate claims that the paratroopers lost around sixty men dead and suffered 150 wounded. As a result, an Airborne battalion was inoperable for months. Former ARVN officer Nguyen Cong Luan contends that the ambush was a worse defeat for South Vietnam than Ap Bac because the supposedly “invincible paratroopers” had been mauled.<sup>314</sup> It further demonstrates how a singular focus on Ap Bac fails to account for the complexities of the war in 1963. By focusing solely on Ap Bac, one misses the ups and downs of the ARVN war effort. Only by paying attention to these contours is it possible to come to a more complete understanding of the state of the war in 1963.

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<sup>312</sup> ORLL 29, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>313</sup> “33 Die in Vietnam Guerilla Attack,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1963.

<sup>314</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 221.

The war north of the Delta went well for ARVN in 1963. From 31 March to 17 April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Strike Force Company of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, a Montagnard militia program, conducted Operation Dan Thang 401 in Phu Bon Province near the major city of Pleiku. They were supported by United States Special Forces Detachment A – 412. Their objective was to destroy a Viet Cong base in the area and as they approached it, they were continuously harassed by small arms fire. The operation produced little contact with the enemy – only a few minor skirmishes. However, during their journey, the Strike Force discovered refugees whose homes had been burned to the ground by the guerillas. The refugees requested to be resettled under government control, which they preferred.<sup>315</sup> Although Operation Dan Thang 401 did little damage to the guerillas, it did expand the government's control over the population. Most importantly, it suggests that at least some of the Vietnamese rural population preferred the government's rule to the Viet Cong.

Further highlighting ARVN success in the north, on 8 April they won an important victory in the northern coastal area of Quang Ngai, where the strategic hamlet program was considered quite successful. The Viet Cong launched a major attack on 10 strategic hamlets in the region with about four hundred men. In doing so, they made the mistake of dividing up their attack groups into units too small to overrun the hamlets. Only one group was of company size and it was driven back by two squads of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, leaving behind six bodies. The local population demonstrated support for the government by revealing the insurgent company's new location to the 25<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Operation Dan Than 401, Operation Planning Files – US – 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

Division who encircled the Viet Cong in a nearby swamp with M113s. The operation ended in failure for the attackers who sustained 134 casualties to ARVN's sixty-two casualties. However, the most important victory for ARVN during this fight was the assistance of the population, which demonstrates the success of the Strategic Hamlet Program in winning over the population.<sup>316</sup> ARVN's objective under the National Campaign Plan was to keep pressure on the Viet Cong and expand government control, not to simply win battles. At Phu Bon and Quang Ngai, ARVN made progress towards those goals. In both cases, the locals expressed support for government rule an important marker of success.

In the north, the war was far less active. This inactivity was in part due to the Central Highlands smaller population than in the Delta which limited the size of the insurgents who depended heavily on the population for supplies and shelter. It was also partly the result of a relatively higher concentration of ARVN units in I and II Corps to repel potential North Vietnamese attacks. This situation gave ARVN the upper hand in the northern provinces which limited the insurgents' ability to attack. There the Viet Cong did not experience near the success they had against the Strategic Hamlet Program in the south.

In late April, the Viet Cong overran two strategic hamlets in the U Minh Forest of the Ca Mau peninsula. On 18 April, they had attacked eight hamlets in the area, but ARVN air support forced them to withdraw without success. The next morning, they concentrated on two of the hamlets which were isolated from the rest and therefore more

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<sup>316</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Stage Wide Raid," *New York Times*, April 19, 1963; Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell, *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960-65* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 147-148.

vulnerable. The guerillas stormed the hamlets with heavy weapons and overwhelming numbers. They routed a company of Self-Defense Corps militia and a company of regulars. The insurgents occupied the hamlets and the government decided not to retake them.<sup>317</sup> Though a serious loss for the government, they made the right decision in not reoccupying the vulnerable hamlets. Concentrating their forces in the six remaining mutually supporting hamlets gave them a better chance to defend them going forward.

For the next month, ARVN experienced a string of defeats in the central highlands area of Kontum. On 27 April, the base of two battalions of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division was infiltrated by two Viet Cong battalions in which thirty-six ARVN soldiers were killed along with an American Master Sergeant. ARVN also suffered twenty-three wounded and lost thirty men missing in action. The guerillas also managed to destroy two pieces of 105mm artillery while sustaining an unknown number of casualties.<sup>318</sup> On 30 April, the Viet Cong attacked ARVN units that were pursuing the perpetrators of the 27 April attack. In the fighting, ARVN managed to kill ten guerillas and wound twenty more while only losing seven of their own men and one wounded.<sup>319</sup> Another ambush in the same area took place on 16 May when the Viet Cong hit an ARVN convoy returning from an operation killing twenty-one men and wounding twenty-four.<sup>320</sup> This series of ARVN defeats demonstrates that even in areas where the war was going well for ARVN, they could experience setbacks.

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<sup>317</sup> David Halberstam, "2 Vietnam Towns Overrun by Reds," *New York Times*, April 24, 1963.

<sup>318</sup> April 1963, MACV J-3 Daily Journal, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration; "Vietcong Assault Takes Heavy Toll," *New York Times*, April 29, 1963; and "Attack by Vietcong Struck Inner Post," *New York Times*, April 30, 1963.

<sup>319</sup> April 1963, MACV J-3 Daily Journal.

<sup>320</sup> May 1963, MACV J-3 Daily Journal, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration; "Reds Kill 21 Vietnam Soldiers," *New York Times*, May 17, 1963.

The strength of ARVN's situation in Kontum is best demonstrated by looking at the Sedang, a Montagnard tribe of 40,000 to 80,000 people who lived in the northern area of the province.<sup>321</sup> They became fiercely anticommunist after the Viet Cong kidnapped some of their people during a raid on their villages in 1962.<sup>322</sup> The Sedang even fended off an insurgent attack armed only with crossbows.<sup>323</sup> Their tightly organized villages were easily incorporated into the Strategic Hamlet Program as they were able to be fortified without resettlement, and two battalions worth of Sedang were trained as part of the Self-Defense Corps. The tribe was well known for its courage, aggressiveness, and martial skill, and the militiamen who defended villages often fought to the death.<sup>324</sup> During the summer of 1963, the Sedang defeated the Viet Cong near the village of Dak Bom. A Sedang woman spotted a dozen insurgents about one mile from the village and notified the Self-Defense Corps. A group of ten militiamen tracked the Viet Cong and charged when they got within one hundred yards. They killed five of the guerillas while losing one man of their own.<sup>325</sup> The Sedang demonstrated strong support for the government in Kontum and an incredible ability to defend themselves from Viet Cong attack without much American support. They illustrate the potential for success that resulted from the Strategic Hamlet Program.

While the war in the North was making progress, there is also evidence to suggest the war in the Delta was going better than is generally believed. ARVN won an

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<sup>321</sup> Marilou Fromme, Elaine M. Murphy, William Stockton, Jr., and Joann L. Schrock, *Ethnographic Study Series: Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1966), 721.

<sup>322</sup> Fromme, *Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam*, 753.

<sup>323</sup> Fromme, *Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam*, 749.

<sup>324</sup> Fromme, *Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam*, 753; Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 231.

<sup>325</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 236.



impressive victory in the Plain of Reeds on 18 May. The Viet Cong attacked two battalions of ARVN infantry supported by twelve armored personnel carriers. As the guerillas crossed the waist high muddy water of the open paddy, the APCs launched a brutal counterattack. They crushed insurgents under their tracks and raked the Viet Cong with their machine guns. At one point, two brave guerillas attempted to rush the APCs with grenades, but they were killed before they could finish their attack. In the fighting, between forty and eighty Viet Cong were killed and twelve were captured. Only one ARVN soldier was killed in the battle. The American advisors believed that the Viet Cong had launched the doomed attack because the communist propaganda that came out of Ap Bac made them overconfident.<sup>326</sup> Whatever the reason, ARVN dealt a major blow to the enemy.

On 22 May, ARVN won another major victory in the Delta province of Ba Xuyen in Operation Duc Thang 17/42. The operation was conducted by Eagle Force which consisted of one battalion of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, two Ranger companies, and an M113 company. They were attempting to flush out any Viet Cong in the area and engage targets of opportunity. Their hunt turned up an estimated 410 guerillas. Eagle force mauled the Viet Cong in the fighting, killing thirty-two of the enemy and capturing another forty-two prisoners.<sup>327</sup> They had managed to eliminate eighteen percent of the enemy forces they found. In both Ba Xuyen and the Plain of Reeds, ARVN put pressure on the Viet Cong by bringing them into battle and denied them an opportunity to destroy the government's strategic hamlets.

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<sup>326</sup> "84 Guerillas Slain in One-Day Vietnamese Drive," *New York Times*, May 19, 1963.

<sup>327</sup> ORLL 32, Operational Reports – Lessons Learned, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration; May 1963, MACV J-3 Daily Journal.

The province in which the battle of Ap Bac took place is useful for examining the extent of ARVN success in the Delta in 1963. Dinh Tuong Province, in the Mekong Delta, is generally considered one of the areas where the Viet Cong experienced the most success dismantling the government's strategic hamlets. However, the Viet Cong experienced little improvement in their situation in the immediate aftermath of Ap Bac. In fact, the South Vietnamese government even expanded its control over the province at the start of 1963.<sup>328</sup> By summer, the Viet Cong decided to increase their effort to attack the hamlets and began by overrunning a government post in the village of Tan Ly Dong. However, South Vietnam immediately rebuilt the post restoring their control over the population.<sup>329</sup>

In their hamlet attacks, the Viet Cong faced the same dilemma the Americans faced later in the war. Attacking and taking an enemy controlled village only to immediately abandon it is ineffective at winning over that population. The villagers admitted that much themselves. They said to the Viet Cong cadres, "if you want to liberate the hamlets, please try to finish the job. It's no use having you come to attack at night when the following morning we have to rebuild them again."<sup>330</sup> They also said, "please mobilize the armed units to come and occupy the strategic hamlet for good. It's a waste of effort to destroy it and then withdraw."<sup>331</sup> These statements reveal that even if the hamlet militia were overrun, as long as ARVN could prevent the Viet Cong from permanently occupying the hamlet they could maintain government control over the

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<sup>328</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 407.

<sup>329</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 409, 410.

<sup>330</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 411.

<sup>331</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 412.

population, even if they supported the insurgents, and continue to make progress toward achieving victory. For the Viet Cong to make progress toward victory, they needed to do more than overrun the hamlets. They needed to occupy them.

Following the Tan Ly Dong attack, the Viet Cong failed to take the villages of Long Dinh, Tam Hiep, and Xuan Son.<sup>332</sup> Often the guerillas attacked the hamlets at night and the government rebuilt them in the morning. The government's posts were surrounded continuously, and soldiers rarely ventured out of the hamlets.<sup>333</sup> Despite this the government still controlled the population cutting the Viet Cong off from their main source of recruits, supplies, and shelter. After successfully occupying the village of Cam Son on 26 May, the guerillas decided to launch a new effort to destroy the hamlets.<sup>334</sup> They called it the July 20 Campaign for the day on which it was scheduled to begin. In order to accomplish their objectives, the Dinh Tuong Viet Cong's main force units, the 514<sup>th</sup> and 261<sup>st</sup> Battalions, which had achieved victory at Ap Bac had to mass up and attack the hamlets with enough force to occupy them.<sup>335</sup> This presented an excellent opportunity for ARVN to face them in battle.

The Viet Cong's major success in the campaign came at Vinh Kim where the 514<sup>th</sup> and 261<sup>st</sup> Battalions overran the Self-Defense Corps post in the village. The guerillas celebrated it as a glorious victory in which they imagined that "the country would be reunified very soon."<sup>336</sup> The next day they abandoned the village and the government reoccupied it. The Viet Cong's inability to hold onto overrun hamlets

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<sup>332</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 412, 415.

<sup>333</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 413.

<sup>334</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 417.

<sup>335</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 418.

<sup>336</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 420.

allowed South Vietnam to exert control over the population and to continue to make progress toward victory.

On 20 July, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company of the 514th Battalion launched an operation to disrupt strategic hamlets in Cho Gao district. In response, the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, under the command of ARVN's Chief of Staff General, Tran Thien Khiem, was sent out face the Viet Cong in what was essentially a rematch of Ap Bac. The battle took place near the village of Quon Long.<sup>337</sup> Like at Ap Bac, the guerillas were well dug in. They manned complex foxholes that included escape tunnels which suggests the extensiveness of their fortifications. Furthermore, they had three BAR light machine guns covering the approach to their position over open paddy. ARVN sent in infantry supported by armored personnel carriers and air power. They attacked in two groups. One company of infantry advanced alone through the paddy under immense enemy fire. In doing so, they lost fourteen men killed in action, but they pressed on and captured the enemy defenses. The second group, supported by APCs, had a much easier time overrunning the Viet Cong's defenses. After the battle, ARVN found fifty-eight enemy bodies and estimated that as many as eighty more fatalities may have been pulled away by the guerillas. Only eighteen ARVN soldiers were killed with forty-five more wounded.<sup>338</sup>

The battle of Quon Long was a major victory for ARVN. They successfully defended the strategic hamlets and put an end to the Viet Cong offensive meant to destroy them. However, most importantly, they demonstrated that Ap Bac cannot be taken as representative of their combat performance. In almost the same conditions as Ap

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<sup>337</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 420.

<sup>338</sup> David Halberstam, "Saigon Army Routs Strong Red Force," *New York Times*, July 22, 1963.

Bac, ARVN managed to succeed where they had failed on 3 January. They successfully used infantry, armor, and air power to attack enemy defenses over an open rice paddy. They fought aggressively and dealt a heavy blow to the Viet Cong. The battle of Quon Long illustrates that war in 1963 was going far better for ARVN than simply examining Ap Bac suggests.

The Viet Cong's fortunes in Dinh Tuong did not fare any better in the months leading up to the Coup. Though they stressed destroying hamlets, those operations made up only ten percent of their engagements with ARVN.<sup>339</sup> After the mauling at Quon Long, the 514<sup>th</sup> Battalion was reluctant to fight ARVN the rest of the year and few gains were made until the fall of Diem.<sup>340</sup> Even in one of their most successful provinces, the Viet Cong were unable to destroy the Strategic Hamlet Program. Outside of the Delta, the Viet Cong were even less effective rarely attacking the strategic hamlets.<sup>341</sup> The government still controlled large portions of the population through the Strategic Hamlet Program, and as their more successful provinces improved, they could afford to redeploy forces to concentrate on more troublesome areas. In fact, they did just that on 22 September by moving the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division into the Mekong Delta to assist the 7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Divisions in spreading government control.<sup>342</sup> As the Diem regime neared its end, South Vietnam was well positioned to continue making progress, with the Strategic Hamlet Program and National Campaign Plan, towards their goal of a government controlled South Vietnam.

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<sup>339</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 425.

<sup>340</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 426.

<sup>341</sup> Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 425.

<sup>342</sup> David Halberstam, "Vietnam Augments Troops in the Delta," *New York Times*, September 23, 1963.

For the Republic of Vietnam, the summer of 1963 was dominated by a political debacle known as the Buddhist crisis. It began on 8 May when nine Buddhists were killed by Civil Guard militiamen in a protest in Hue against a newly passed law that banned the flying of Buddhist flags on the Buddha's birthday.<sup>343</sup> This sparked further Buddhist protests which President Diem harshly put down. To many this made the Catholic Diem look like a tyrant who was religiously persecuting his own people. On 11 June, a Buddhist monk protested the government's Buddhist policies by burning himself alive.<sup>344</sup> Diem's sister in law, Madame Nhu, described the act as a "barbeque" which seriously damaged the image of the Diem regime.<sup>345</sup> On 18 August, the government's repression peaked with a series of military raids on Buddhist Pagodas throughout Vietnam.<sup>346</sup>

Members of the orthodox school of Vietnam War historiography claim that the government's authoritarian response to the Buddhist crisis caused them to lose the hearts and minds of the people to the Viet Cong as popular support for the Diem regime plummeted. For instance, Neil Sheehan makes this argument by quoting a cable from American Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge to President Kennedy. "The Viet Cong are steadily gaining in strength; have more of the population on their side than has the GVN (South Vietnam) ... more and more students are going over to the Viet Cong."<sup>347</sup> However, Lodge's argument is difficult to substantiate due to a lack of evidence. Absent something like polling data on the South Vietnamese population's support for the regime, we simply have to take Lodge and Sheehan at their word.

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<sup>343</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 334.

<sup>344</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 334.

<sup>345</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 335.

<sup>346</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 354-355.

<sup>347</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 364.

However, their claims can easily be contradicted. The commander of the ARVN 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment in I Corps claimed to American General Victor Krulak that the common people did not care about the Buddhist crisis.<sup>348</sup> In light of these contradictory claims, is it possible to come to a more concrete determination about whether the Buddhist crisis caused the Diem regime to lose the support of the people to the Viet Cong?

Fortunately, there is a more useful measure of a population's support for insurgent movements than popular support or hearts and minds. It is called 'tangible support' and it was first conceived by the RAND Corporation in a study of insurgencies called *Paths to Victory*.<sup>349</sup> It asserts that tangible support is the most accurate indicator of an insurgency's success or failure based on an analysis of seventy-one case studies of insurgencies that have taken place since World War II. It defines tangible support as "the ability of the insurgents to maintain the needed levels of recruits, weapons, and material, funding, intelligence, and sanctuary."<sup>350</sup> Tangible support can come from outside assistance or the population itself. Therefore, an increase or decrease in tangible support to the insurgents can be used to evaluate whether or not their support among the population is growing.

Unfortunately, gathering accurate data on the factors that make up tangible support is difficult. Insurgencies, including the Viet Cong, prefer to keep that information hidden and no American or South Vietnamese estimates of many of the factors exist. So, lacking such data on the tangible support of Viet Cong is it possible to get even a rough

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<sup>348</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, Document 82.

<sup>349</sup> Clarke, *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Washington: RAND Corporation, 2013).

<sup>350</sup> Clarke, *Paths to Victory*, xviii.

measurement of their tangible support? Absolutely. Major increases in tangible support to insurgent movements inevitably become apparent as an actual increase in the fighting abilities of the insurgents in combat. It happened several times during the Indochina and Vietnam Wars. In 1949, Communist China won their civil war and increased tangible support to the Viet Minh, which became apparent in their destruction of the French bases along *Route Coloniale 4* in 1950.<sup>351</sup> It was also apparent in 1964 after the North Vietnamese first sent their army units south at the end of 1963, leading to a series of major victories like the battles of Ba Gia and Binh Gia.<sup>352</sup> This thesis also demonstrates that the reverse was true the increase in weapons, material, funding, and intelligence that resulted from President Kennedy's decision to increase the advisory effort in South Vietnam produced impressive battlefield results in 1962. So, did the Viet Cong's combat abilities improve after an increase in tangible support resulting from the Buddhist crisis?

At first glance, it might look like that was the case. The State Department's intelligence agency thought so claiming that after June, South Vietnam had experienced "an unfavorable shift in the military balance."<sup>353</sup> Statistics on the number of Viet Cong attacks per month in 1963 show that the State Department's view was not entirely accurate. After 407 attacks in June, the number of Viet Cong attacks did increase slightly to 410 in July. However, the number of attacks fell to 368 in August.<sup>354</sup> This decrease in attacks and the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's victory at Quon Long on 21 July suggests that there was no

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<sup>351</sup> William Waddel, *In the Year of the Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945-1951* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018) 30-31.

<sup>352</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962-64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (October 2000): 617; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 336-339.

<sup>353</sup> Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 366.

<sup>354</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 462 note 15.



immediate increase in tangible support to the Viet Cong during the summer of the crisis. But a sharp increase in the number of Viet Cong attacks to 503 in September supports the possibility of an increase in tangible support.<sup>355</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to further examine the fighting in September to determine if the Viet Cong's combat power had really increased.

In the second week of September, the Viet Cong launched a new offensive in the Delta. It quickly devolved into a disaster as the guerillas were torn apart by ARVN counterattacks. The offensive started on 9 September when two hundred men of the 261<sup>st</sup> and 514<sup>th</sup> Battalions armed with heavy weapons attacked three Civil Guard outposts in Co Gong.<sup>356</sup> ARVN sent three companies of Civil Guards with armored support to reinforce the outposts. On the way, they were ambushed by the guerillas, but in this case the terrain favored the defenders. The Viet Cong had set up their ambush in an open area. If they attempted to withdraw, they would be mauled by American air power. This forced them to stay and fight, giving ARVN an excellent opportunity to up the pressure on the Viet Cong. The ambushers managed to blow up an armored personnel carrier with a recoilless rifle, but the rest of ARVN's armored support quickly turned the tide of the battle. A group of five armored cars charged the insurgents' position while the militiamen executed a flanking maneuver. The guerillas were crushed under the wheels of the armored cars.<sup>357</sup> When the fighting stopped, the American advisors counted eighty-three Viet Cong bodies scattered across the battlefield. While losing only twenty-two men

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<sup>355</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 462 note 15.

<sup>356</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 246-247; "Vietcong Battered by Vietnam Troops," *New York Times* September 10, 1963.

<sup>357</sup> "Vietcong Battered."

killed in action and twenty-eight wounded, ARVN had managed to eliminate nearly half of their enemy.<sup>358</sup> Already the Viet Cong's new September offensive was in trouble.

The next day, 10 September, the Viet Cong attacked two district capitals in the Ca Mau peninsula: Cai Nuoc and Dam Doi. Both attacks got off to a successful start but quickly fell apart during the ARVN counterattack. Shortly after midnight, the Viet Cong overran Cai Nuoc following a brief mortar barrage. They held the city until well after noon, during which time they assassinated the district chief. At 1830, the 5<sup>th</sup> Airborne Battalion dropped on Cai Nuoc and reoccupied the town after a heavy firefight.<sup>359</sup> Cai Nuoc was a modest success for the Viet Cong. They managed to hold the city for most of the day and dealt a major blow to the district government. However, the battle at Cai Nuoc was quickly overshadowed by the sharp fighting at Dam Doi.

At 0130, the 306<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Main Force Battalion attacked Dam Doi with around four hundred men.<sup>360</sup> The town was defended by a single company of Civil Guards who prevented the Viet Cong attackers from completely overrunning the town.<sup>361</sup> In response, General Huynh Van Cao ordered the Vietnamese Marines to retake the city. At 0830, the 4<sup>th</sup> Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Battalion landed in a flooded rice paddy and began the slow process of slogging through the waist-deep water of the paddy towards the city.<sup>362</sup> Their advance was halted by enemy machine gun fire. By nightfall they managed

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<sup>358</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 246-247.

<sup>359</sup> CINCPAC to MACV, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 - 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration; David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Attack 2 Towns," *New York Times*, September 12.

<sup>360</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps' Twenty-One Years of Warfare*, 48; Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Attack."

<sup>361</sup> Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Attack."

<sup>362</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 49.

to find a suitable site to set up a 57mm recoilless rifle that knocked out the Viet Cong machine gun which allowed them to attack and occupy the enemy position.

At 1000, 3<sup>rd</sup> Company landed next to a line of palm trees by the Dam Doi River.<sup>363</sup> Here the most important forgotten ARVN victory of 1963 began. The Marines' landing zone placed them right next to the Viet Cong defensive positions on a series of mounds near the banks of the river. This left the Marines dangerously exposed to enemy machine gun fire, nearly unable to advance through the paddies, and totally unable to see the guerillas through the foliage. They were in fact in an even worse position than the 7<sup>th</sup> Division at Ap Bac, because here the Viet Cong also occupied the high ground making any attempted assault all the more difficult.<sup>364</sup> For the next few hours, the Marines were pinned down by a barrage of enemy small arms fire.

At 1300, a reserve platoon under the command of Aspirant Nguyen Van Dien reinforced 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on their right side. They were immediately suppressed by enemy machine gun fire. Several hours later, running low on ammunition, Aspirant Dien ordered a charge on the Viet Cong position. His platoon slogged through the leech-filled paddy taking fire the entire time. During the charge, Aspirant Dien was wounded but the platoon kept moving.<sup>365</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion joined in, launching waves of assaults on the enemy positions. By nightfall the Marines took the enemy positions forcing the Viet Cong to withdraw.<sup>366</sup> The Marines 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions had easily reoccupied the city around noon.<sup>367</sup> In the fighting the Marines killed one hundred twenty-two guerillas and captured

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<sup>363</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 49.

<sup>364</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 49, 53.

<sup>365</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 51.

<sup>366</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 49.

<sup>367</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 51.

multiple machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles. They only lost thirteen men killed in action and twenty-nine wounded.<sup>368</sup>

The Marines rightly noted that “the Dam Doi Victory was ARVN’s biggest victory for the entire year of 1963.”<sup>369</sup> At Dam Doi, the Sea Tigers succeeded under even worse conditions than had existed at Ap Bac. They had no air support, and they faced the added challenge of attacking an even stronger enemy position.<sup>370</sup> By pushing a series of daring assaults against the Viet Cong’s fortification through to victory, the Marines definitively proved that ARVN’s defeat at Ap Bac was not representative of ARVN’s overall combat performance.

Furthermore, they successfully put an end to the Viet Cong September offensive. The guerillas carried out no major attacks for the rest of the month and in October the total number of Viet Cong attacks plummeted to 369.<sup>371</sup> As demonstrated by the fighting at Co Gong and Dam Doi, there was no noticeable increase in the fighting capabilities of the Viet Cong. This suggests that at least in the months before the coup against Diem there was no increase in tangible support to the Viet Cong as a result of the Buddhist crisis. The people may have stopped supporting the Diem regime, but they did not start supporting the Viet Cong. Those most upset at the government’s repression were generally the most devout Buddhists who had no sympathy for the officially atheist Viet Cong. The September offensive was an opportunistic attempt to cause the people to join a general uprising to overthrow the government. That the people did not rise up to support

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<sup>368</sup> CINCPAC to MACV, Command Reporting Files #2 – 1962 - 1963, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>369</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 52.

<sup>370</sup> Vietnamese Marine Association, *The Vietnamese Marine Corps*, 49.

<sup>371</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 462 note 15.

the Viet Cong, further illustrates that there was no increase in tangible support to the insurgents.

As the Diem regime neared its end, it was indeed struggling politically, but it was still effectively making progress against the Viet Cong. The Strategic Hamlet Program gave the government control over a large portion of the population, and the National Campaign Plan gave ARVN an effective strategy for defending and expanding the government's control throughout the country. On the battlefield, at places like Tay Ninh, War Zone D, Quon Long, and Dam Doi, ARVN's forces still held the upper hand against their Viet Cong enemies.

Surprisingly, the Viet Cong's own accounts of the war in 1962 and 1963 admit that ARVN was making progress – a rare occasion in their generally triumph accounts. The North's official history of the war states that “liberated areas and areas where the masses had seized control shrank.”<sup>372</sup> The official history of Military Region 5 near the DMZ admits that they were unable to defeat ARVN in battle or stop them from putting people in strategic hamlets. It says, “during 1963 enemy forces in Region 5 built 1,800 more hamlets, raising the number to 2,800 hamlets and causing us enormous problems.”<sup>373</sup> The situation was just as bad in Military Region 6 just to the south. In Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces more than ninety percent of the population was secure in the strategic hamlets. The Viet Cong admit “the balance of forces weighed heavily

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<sup>372</sup> The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam 1954-1975*, 112.

<sup>373</sup> Military Region 5 Headquarters and Party Committee, *Military Region 5: Victories and Lessons Learned During the Resistance War Against The Americans, Volume I*, 48.

against us, and ... the enemy was able to gather and take away a large number of civilians from our bases and liberated areas.”<sup>374</sup>

The history of Military Region 7 describes the Politburo’s analysis of the situation. “The enemy held military superiority over us. Even though our political forces were strong, our armed forces were still weak.”<sup>375</sup> “The reality was that the enemy had been able to grab control of the population and the land from us, and he had drawn away for his own use our sources of resources and manpower.”<sup>376</sup> Clearly, ARVN was successfully implementing the National Campaign Plan – keeping pressure on the Viet Cong and allowing the government to expand the strategic hamlets. The history of Military Region 9 in the Delta confesses that their attempts to destroy the hamlets were unsuccessful. “After we destroyed a strategic hamlet, the enemy would rebuild it again. A number of hamlets were destroyed and rebuilt again many times. We expended tremendous efforts in the program to destroy strategic hamlets but in fact accomplished very little.”<sup>377</sup>

On 31 October 1963, South Vietnam was well positioned to win the Vietnam War. It had an effective strategy and a successful army that was more than capable of defeating the enemy on the battlefield. Whether ARVN could have achieved victory if they continued to pursue the NCP is impossible to know. However, on that last day of October the future looked bright and ARVN had the upper hand in the fight against the

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<sup>374</sup> Tran Duong, *History of Military Region 6*, 103.

<sup>375</sup> Military Region 7 Headquarters and Party Committee, *The Resistance War in Eastern Cochinchina (1945-1975), Volume I*, 128.

<sup>376</sup> Military Region 7 Headquarters and Party Committee, *The Resistance War in Eastern Cochinchina (1945-1975), Volume I*, 144.

<sup>377</sup> Military Region 9 Headquarters and Party Committee, *Military Region 9: 30 Years of Resistance*, 329.

Viet Cong. On 1 November, they threw away their best chance at victory in a coup d'état that unleashed a long period of political turmoil in which all the gains that ARVN had made over the course of 1962 and 1963 evaporated.

## CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

From 1962 to 1963, ARVN was making progress toward victory in their war against the Viet Cong. The first few years of the war had gone poorly for South Vietnam, but President Kennedy's decision in 1962 to increase military aid to Vietnam turned the tide of the war into the South's favor. American bombers, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers gave ARVN forces the firepower and mobility they needed to defeat the Viet Cong on the battlefield. As 1963 began, the struggling insurgents mauled ARVN's 7<sup>th</sup> Division at Ap Bac. Command and Intelligence failures by Americans and Vietnamese combined with bad luck, poor terrain, and a determined enemy produced a serious debacle. However, the failures were not representative of ARVN's combat performance during the rest of the year. In key battles at Tay Ninh, Quon Long, and Dam Doi, ARVN proved that it was still the master of the battlefield in Vietnam.

As the Diem regime neared its end, the American military performed several assessments of ARVN's progress in the war against the Viet Cong and determined that they were on the path to victory. The report of General Victor Krulak on 10 September 1963 observed that "the Viet Cong war will be won if the current U.S. military and sociological programs are pursued, irrespective of grave defects in the regime."<sup>378</sup> Likewise the 2 October 1963 McNamara – Taylor report concluded that "the military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress."<sup>379</sup> The American military clearly believed that the Diem regime's authoritarian policies had done nothing to hamper

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<sup>378</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Document 82.

<sup>379</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Document 167.



the progress of the war in Vietnam. In light of this military progress, one must wonder why a coup even happened?

The answer is rather simple. While the Diem regime's authoritarian response to the Buddhist crisis did not cause them to lose the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people to the Viet Cong, it did cause them to lose the hearts and minds of the American people, who in reality were their chief supporters. Polling conducted in response to the Buddhist crisis showed that the support of the American public for President Kennedy's Vietnam policy and by extension for President Diem had fallen to only twenty-eight percent in favor with fifty-six percent against.<sup>380</sup> As Diem's religious discrimination was the obvious cause of this decline, supporting his removal seemed like the obvious way to fix Kennedy's falling numbers.

The American government's dissatisfaction with the Diem regime presented a great opportunity for some of South Vietnam's generals to seize power for themselves. The coup leaders claimed they removed Diem from power for the good of the country, but their actions afterwards suggest otherwise.<sup>381</sup> That they had no political plan that they were ready to implement after the coup suggests that the coup was not started in response to any dissatisfaction with the regime's policies.<sup>382</sup> However, they very quickly began promoting their own into positions of power. For instance, General Ton That Dinh was made Governor of Saigon and Minister of the Interior. General Nguyen Van Thieu was promoted to brigadier general. Major General Mai Huu Xuan was made Chief of

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<sup>380</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 245.

<sup>381</sup> Tran Van Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung: Hoi Ky Khan Tri* (Xuan Thu Publishing, 1989), 186.

<sup>382</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 227.

Police.<sup>383</sup> The coup plotters were not crusaders against authoritarianism. They were simply opportunistic power seekers. Furthermore, the forces used in the coup plot were not motivated by dissatisfaction with the regime's policies. They were paid with 3,000,000 South Vietnamese piasters that were given to the coup plotters by the CIA.<sup>384</sup>

For ARVN, the coup was a particularly tragic event. It proved to be the cause of ARVN's downfall instead of South Vietnam's salvation as the political turmoil that followed eroded ARVN's fighting ability leaving it broken and defeated. The coup began on 1 November 1963 and was led by Generals Duong Van Minh, Le Van Kim, Tran Thien Khiem, Ton That Dinh, and Tran Van Don.<sup>385</sup> Their forces consisted primarily of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, commanded by Col. Nguyen Van Thieu; the Marines; two armored task forces; and a reserve platoon of tanks with some assistance from reservists.<sup>386</sup> They immediately acted to cut Diem off from any supporters who might be able to come to his rescue. The divisions in IV Corps were the most loyal to Diem. So, they were the first to be cut off. They sent Colonel Nguyen Huu Cu to arrest Colonel Bui Dinh Dam and take over command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>387</sup> They also moved the ferries across the Mekong river to prevent the rest of IV Corp's divisions from attempting to save Diem.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> November 1963, MACV J-3 Daily Journal, Records Group 472, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>384</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 211.

<sup>385</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 193.

<sup>386</sup> Ton That Dinh, *20 Nam Binh Nghiep*, (San Jose, CA: Chanh Dao Weekly Newspaper, 1998), 438, 442.

<sup>387</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 93.

<sup>388</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 219.

The South Vietnamese Special Forces were another major ally of Diem that needed to be eliminated. To accomplish this, the coup plotters sent some of the Special Forces far away from Saigon on missions, and they captured the Special Forces commander Colonel Le Quang Tung, put a pistol to his head, forced him to order the rest of his troops to surrender, and then killed him.<sup>389</sup> The commander of the Navy, who was loyal to Diem, Captain Ho Tan Quyen was also murdered.<sup>390</sup> The coup plotters gathered all of the other generals who might be loyal to Diem in their headquarters under the pretense of a JGS meeting. Then the coup plotters arrested them and confiscated their weapons.<sup>391</sup> Before the fighting had even begun the coup had basically succeeded. Diem was cut off from any military support and his 2,500-man Presidential Guard were no match for the coup's forces.

The commander of one of the armored task forces, Major Ly Tong Ba, who had served at Ap Bac, was deeply troubled by his mission. He had joined ARVN to fight the Viet Cong not his fellow ARVN soldiers.<sup>392</sup> In his memoirs he wrote, "my own hands were soiled by the blood of my comrades-in-arms, and in my heart all I ever wanted was solidarity, unity, and constructiveness."<sup>393</sup> As his armored personnel carrier drove down the road to Saigon, he agonized about his orders to attack Gia Long Palace where Diem was staying.<sup>394</sup> He described the coup as the most difficult operation of his career.<sup>395</sup> In

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<sup>389</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 267-268.

<sup>390</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 217.

<sup>391</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 218.

<sup>392</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 93.

<sup>393</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 98.

<sup>394</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 95.

<sup>395</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 98.

this difficult circumstance, Ba and many other ARVN soldiers fought admirably, conclusively demonstrating the superb qualities of the South Vietnamese soldier.

The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Battalions occupied the National Police Headquarters and Saigon Radio Station. The Presidential Guard sent M-41 light tanks and M113s to reoccupy the radio station, but the Marine commander convinced them to surrender.<sup>396</sup> On the night of 1 to 2 November the coup forces surrounded attacked Gia Long Palace. They advanced slowly hoping to limit the bloodshed. Their task force's armored personnel carriers worked with the reserve tank platoon to suppress the defenders while the Marines assaulted the palace. Around dawn, the Marines used a 57mm recoilless rifle to blow a hole in the palace's wall. The Marines stormed inside only to discover that President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had already escaped.<sup>397</sup> They had successfully overthrown the government. The consequences of their success eventually came back to haunt them

Most of the coup plotters never intended to kill Diem in the coup. Major Ba, General Dinh, and General Don all contend that they planned to guarantee the President's safety.<sup>398</sup> However, General Minh had no such intention. At 0645, Diem and Nhu surrendered to the coup plotters who sent several APC's to pick them up from the Catholic church in Cholon where they were hiding. They were assassinated in the back of the APCs by Minh's bodyguard, Nguyen Van Nhung, on the way to the coup plotters headquarters.<sup>399</sup> With them died ARVN's best chance at victory.

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<sup>396</sup> Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 220-221.

<sup>397</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 96; Dinh, *20 Nam Binh Nghiep*, 451.

<sup>398</sup> Ba, *Hoi ky 25 nam khoi lua*, 97; Dinh, *20 Nam Binh Nghiep*, 442; Don, *Viet Nam Nhan Chung*, 230.

<sup>399</sup> Dinh, *20 Nam Binh Nghiep*, 229-231, 234.

Instead of ending the political turmoil that had led to the downfall of the Diem regime, the coup exacerbated it. Every general saw it as an opportunity to launch their own coup and become the man in charge. Over the next two years, nine different governments ruled in Saigon.<sup>400</sup> Each successive government purged the officers in ARVN who were not loyal to the new government. One soldier, Pham Van Dinh, served under four different division commanders, three different regimental commanders, and four different battalion commanders in a single year. Without any steady command presence, the moral of Dinh and his comrades plummeted.<sup>401</sup> Tham Huy Vu was training to become an officer during the coup at the Thu Duc Reserve Officers School. He recalls that over the next year, three of the School's commanders were replaced.<sup>402</sup> Nguyen Cong Luan, then a staff officer in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division, reported that as the Division commander was waiting to be replaced he was "virtually powerless."<sup>403</sup> He also reveals that the morale of the men reached the lowest level of the war so far.<sup>404</sup> The effectiveness of ARVN leadership collapsed after the fall of Diem.

Loyalty to the regime had always been *a factor* in leadership decisions during the Diem administration, often outweighing merit.<sup>405</sup> After the coup, loyalty to whoever was in power became *the primary factor* in selections for promotions. Well-connected officers could advance as many as three ranks relatively quickly. The officer corps became politicized to an extent far greater than under the Diem regime. General Cao Van Vien,

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<sup>400</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 36.

<sup>401</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 38.

<sup>402</sup> Tham Huy Vu, *A Dangerous Journey: From Vietnam to America for Freedom 1963-1987* (Garden Grove, CA: Xay Dung, 2013), 121.

<sup>403</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 239.

<sup>404</sup> Nguyen, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, 240-241.

<sup>405</sup> Cao Van Vien, *Leadership* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1980), 58-59.

who was the commander of the Airborne Brigade during the Diem period and later became the Chief of the Joint General Staff, reported how the politicization of the officer corps weakened ARVN:

This promotion spree created quite a crisis in rank value and seriously undermined military discipline and leadership . . . 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.<sup>406</sup>

The politicization of ARVN leadership degraded its ability to effectively fight the enemy. The Viet Cong took advantage of the situation and reclaimed control over most of the countryside.<sup>407</sup> ARVN's gains in the past two years vanished.

The chaos of post-coup South Vietnam left ARVN severely weakened. North Vietnam wisely decided to take advantage of this situation and sent its own army units south for the first time.<sup>408</sup> From late 1964 to early 1964, the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong defeated ARVN in the Battles of Binh Gia Ba Gia, Song Be, and Dong Xoai.<sup>409</sup> This string of defeats left ARVN unable to defend South Vietnam on its own. In the aftermath, MACV commander General William Westmoreland first recommended to

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<sup>406</sup> Cao, *Leadership*, 62.

<sup>407</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 37.

<sup>408</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962-64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (October 2000): 617; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 336-339.

<sup>409</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 336-339, 372-375, 396-402.

President Johnson that American forces should be used to face the communists in combat.<sup>410</sup>

In 1962 and 1963, ARVN had made steady progress toward its ultimate objective of a noncommunist controlled South Vietnam. Using American-supplied mobility and firepower ARVN had expanded the government's control over the countryside and consistently defeated the Viet Cong. After examining ARVN's entire combat record during this period, defeats like Ap Bac look more like an aberration than the norm. Even the North Vietnamese admitted that ARVN had the upper hand during this period of the war. Through hard fighting and the sacrifices of many brave men, from 1962 to 1963 ARVN was making significant progress in their war against the Viet Cong. Many years of hard fighting remained, but in the months before the coup against Diem South Vietnam's chances of winning were greater than at almost any other point in the war.

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<sup>410</sup> Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, 407.

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