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978-1-107-09844-2 - The Search for Tactical Success in Vietnam: An Analysis of Australian Task Force Combat Operations

Andrew Ross, Robert Hall and Amy Griffin

Excerpt

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

This is a study of the combat effectiveness of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF)¹ in the counter-insurgency campaign in the Second Indo-China War, or what Vietnamese call the ‘American war’. Superficially, 1ATF was a small and insignificant part of the effort by Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) to save South Vietnam from communist domination. However, the Australians and New Zealanders who made up the Task Force had wide experience of counter-insurgency – or, as Australian doctrine then called it, counter-revolutionary warfare.² Of all the forces involved in the counter-insurgency effort in Vietnam, the Australians and New Zealanders were arguably the best trained and most experienced in that form of warfare. The tactical and operational techniques they employed were quite different from those followed by the US Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

In the two decades preceding its involvement in combat operations in Vietnam, the US Army’s main strategic objective was the defeat of the Soviet Red Army in north-western Europe. It was structured, equipped, trained and imbued with doctrine for the waging of high-intensity, conventional war. Finding itself embroiled in Vietnam, its conventional war capabilities, with their emphasis on the employment of massive firepower, had been highly effective against Viet Cong and People’s Army of Vietnam (VC/PAVN)³ main force formations and units between 1965 and 1968. But the US Army was unable to adjust to the lower intensity of war to which the VC/PAVN reverted, particularly after 1968.⁴ A military stalemate ensued that was unresolved until US forces eventually withdrew.

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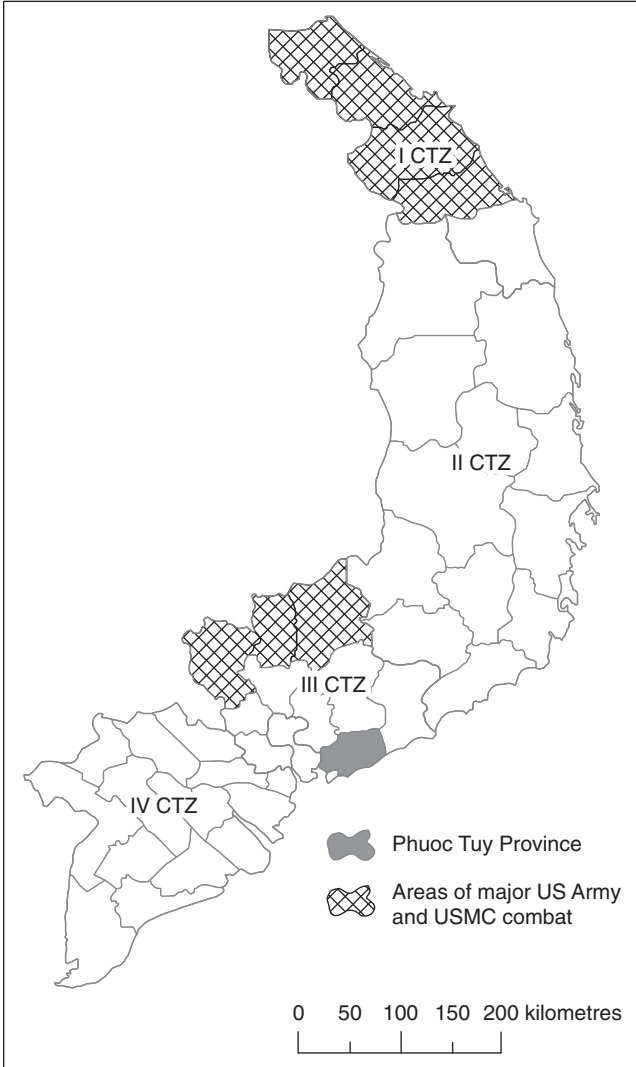
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Map I The Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The map shows Phuoc Tuy province, the IATF area of operations, in relation to the major 'hot points' of the war in I CTZ and the border provinces of III CTZ.

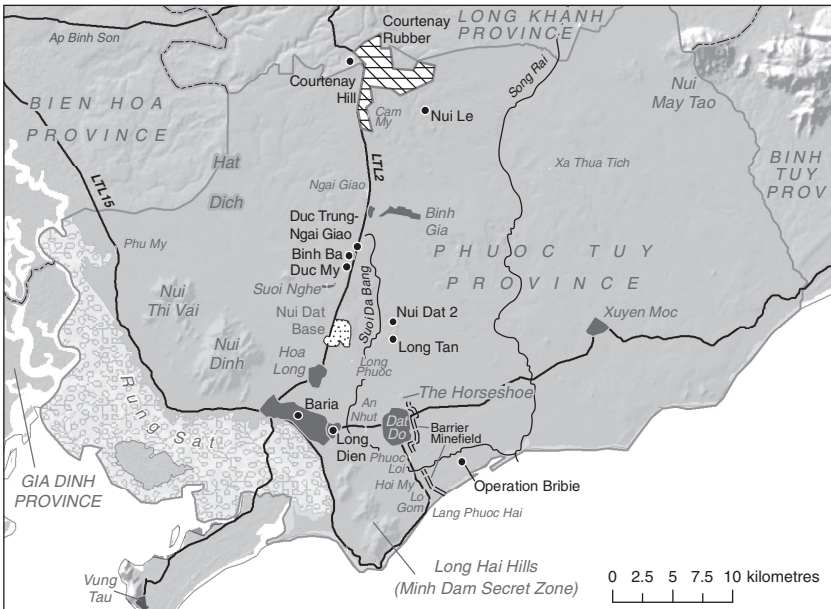
1ATF also met and defeated enemy attempts to escalate the war in Phuoc Tuy province, its area of operations (see maps 1, 2 and 3). But when the enemy reverted to low-intensity war, 1ATF defeated this initiative as well, reducing communist forces and influence in the province.

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Map 2 Phuoc Tuy province

When the Task Force left the province in late 1971, all major roads were open, an economic boom was underway, and other indicators of improving social conditions, such as school attendance, motor vehicle ownership, agricultural production and private ownership of radios and televisions, were on the rise.⁵ These improvements had been built upon the security provided by 1ATF supported by Province Forces. This achievement by the Australian and New Zealand troops of 1ATF has received insufficient recognition by military historians.

The reasons for this are largely related to the incomprehension many historians and military analysts have of the thousands of small contacts⁶ that made up the low-intensity war fought by units of the Task Force. Normal techniques of historical analysis do not readily expose the tactical patterns of such activities. Consequently, most historians have concentrated on the 16 or so high-intensity battles fought by the Task Force against large units of the enemy.⁷ These can be defined more easily and seem to have produced clear results in favour of one side or the other, allowing tactical dissection.

However, the tactical patterns of low-intensity warfare can be made clear by using the discipline of operations research to assess the

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Map 3 The region surrounding Phuoc Tuy province

effectiveness of 1ATF tactical techniques and operations. Quantitative analytical techniques test hypotheses more thoroughly, and make most assumptions clearer than the typical historical analysis. Consequently, conclusions and observations derived from operations research have more authority, which makes this study unique for counter-insurgency generally and for the Australian historiography of the Vietnam War in particular.

Two problems immediately become evident. First, a mass of detailed, reliable data on each of more than four thousand combat events has to be assembled into a database. Second, considerable computer support is needed to allow the sorting and correlation of this data so that trends can be established and measures of effectiveness can be applied across these thousands of contacts. Even in low-intensity conflicts, fighting soldiers rarely have time to record every contact in the detail that might satisfy a historian or an operations research analyst. What official information might exist is usually spread across many government and independent sources. The assembly of this data into a usable form requires a huge process of reconstruction before any serious and detailed analysis can begin. The scale of this effort helps to explain why historians tend

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not to carry out detailed analysis of low-intensity conflicts. The writing of narrative history, military biographies, unit histories and the like is easier and the rewards more certain. Such approaches to history also make a major contribution to our understanding of war by exploring the human experience of combat and soldiers' responses to it. But the professional military readership and those with an interest in the nature of combat in counter-insurgency deserve a different approach; one that relies on the detailed analysis of the individual combat events that make up a campaign.

We have overcome the problems noted above by building a series of computer-based databases and subjecting them to statistical, spatial and temporal analysis. The foremost of these is the 1ATF Contact Database 1966–1971, and the second is the Phuoc Tuy Incident Database 1966–1971. Together these represent a unique analytical tool through which to study and assess the combat performance of the Task Force. These analytical tools, which form the basis of the analysis we present here, and the sources of the data on which they are based, are described in the Annex. They show conclusively that the Task Force outfought the enemy in all phases of the counter-insurgency war. The following chapters explain how this was achieved and show that 1ATF's counter-insurgency techniques created immense problems for the enemy in the province. The attack on enemy food supplies was a key component of the campaign and gradually reduced the enemy's combat power.

The successes of British Commonwealth forces in the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation with Indonesia in North Borneo supplied the theory and practical experience for the tactics and strategy of 1ATF in South Vietnam. But this experience was dismissed as irrelevant to Vietnam by senior US generals⁸ in favour of the brutal and unsophisticated strategy of attrition. Although the Task Force operated in a backwater compared to the main centres of ground combat in South Vietnam, its success in the low-intensity counter-insurgency campaign raises questions about how the campaign throughout South Vietnam might have been conceived and implemented differently.

Counter-insurgency shows no sign of diminishing as a form of warfare. Theorists and practitioners recognise that it is a form of warfare in which politics and, particularly, the building and maintenance of political legitimacy are at the heart of the struggle. This is the case now as it was in Vietnam. Yet combat remains a key factor and a precursor to the culmination of the political struggle. While insurgents use armed struggle and terrorism to further their political ends, combat will remain a prominent

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feature of counter-insurgency. The nature of combat in counter-insurgency also remains largely unchanged since Vietnam, especially for the insurgents. The military impact of the insurgent still rests primarily on extensive use of light weapons and land mines. Insurgents still seek to immerse themselves in the civilian population, to retain the initiative and to conduct a myriad of small, harassing contacts punctuated by larger battles often designed more to achieve political outcomes than military ones. Insurgents still lack air power and armour. What heavy indirect fire support they have tends to remain weak, lacks precision and flexibility, and is therefore poorly suited to the support of ground assaults. The insurgents themselves tend to be highly motivated and well led, but have a tenuous yet surprisingly resilient logistics system. Their communications networks remain weak in comparison to those of Western armies, but markedly improved over those available to the VC/PAVN during the Vietnam War.

Although we recognise that political reform, economic development, social development, the rule of law, national psychology and many other non-military factors determine the outcome in counter-insurgency, and that the consolidation of political legitimacy is the ultimate goal, we do not address these factors in this book. All of these factors depend upon a benign, or at least acquiescent, security environment in which to develop. The insurgents seek through violent means to undermine government legitimacy, and to attack the government's delivery of political reform, economic development and the like, while promoting their own political legitimacy. 'Insurgent' anti-government activity would be acceptable were it not for the use of violence. The resort to violence signals that the insurgents believe they cannot achieve their aims through political means alone. Insurgent violence and its counter are therefore at the heart of counter-insurgency. Counter-insurgent military forces aim, through combat operations, to destroy insurgent capacity for violence and, in so doing, to restore security to the people so that the struggle for legitimacy can be resolved, preferably in favour of the government, through political means. Hence combat operations form a foundation on which the other non-combat factors in the struggle for legitimacy are based.

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CHAPTER |

BALANCE OF CAPABILITY

THE MISSION OF 1ATF

Before an analysis of 1ATF's combat performance can be made, it is necessary to consider the balance of capabilities between the Task Force and the enemy forces it confronted. Combat capability is the product of a number of elements including strength, weapons, mobility, communications, experience, training and intelligence. Tying these elements together and providing an intellectual framework for them were the competing military doctrines of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary warfare.

When it arrived in Phuoc Tuy province in June 1966, 1ATF aimed to substantially reduce VC/PAVN military capability and, in so doing, to provide a security shield behind which the Republic of Vietnam could continue with political, economic and social reforms and the improvement of living conditions for the provincial population. These reforms, it was expected, would undermine the appeal of the enemy's political manifesto. The combined pressures of these reforms, together with the military pressure applied by the Task Force, ARVN and other government and Free World forces would cause the enemy's military capability and political support to wane, and that segment of the province's population hostile to the government would begin to move to a neutral or pro-government position. To achieve its role of providing the security shield, the Task Force planned to dominate the enemy militarily and to cut it off

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from its principal source of support, food, intelligence and manpower: the local population. All this was classic counter-revolutionary war doctrine as defined and practised by the British Commonwealth and adopted by the Australian Army.

AUSTRALIAN COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE DOCTRINE

During the Second World War the Australian Army gained extensive experience in jungle warfare against the Japanese. In particular, the ‘mopping-up’ campaigns in Wewak, Bougainville and New Britain had been characterised by small-unit engagements that presaged the counter-revolutionary campaigns the Australian and New Zealand armies would fight twenty years later in Vietnam.¹ The skills and techniques of jungle warfare were further refined during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) and Confrontation (1963–66).² But of more importance to later operations in Vietnam was that these campaigns familiarised the Australian and New Zealand armies with the requirements of counter-insurgency. British Commonwealth forces, under the leadership of General Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner and Director of Operations, Federation of Malaya, developed a doctrine for the conduct of the counter-insurgency campaign against the ‘communist terrorists’, as they were called. This pamphlet – *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, or *ATOM* – became the ‘bible’ for counter-insurgent forces in Malaya and the foundation of future British Commonwealth counter-insurgency theory.³ It also formed the foundation of the doctrine the Australian Army took to Vietnam, which was published as Pamphlet No. 11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*.⁴

The British Commonwealth response to Indonesia’s confrontation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1966 involved Australian infantry, SAS, artillery and engineers while New Zealand contributed infantry and SAS. Major-General Walter Walker was appointed Commander, British Forces, Borneo, arriving in the theatre in December 1962. He was strongly influenced by Templer’s doctrine for the conduct of the counter-revolutionary campaign in the Malayan Emergency and had also studied insurgencies in Indo-China. Walker devised six principles for the conduct of the campaign in North Borneo. They were: unified operations; timely and accurate information requiring the development of an effective intelligence system; speed, mobility and flexibility; security of bases; domination of the jungle; and lastly, winning the hearts and minds of the people.⁵

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Aspects of Walker's vision of counter-insurgency in North Borneo also found their way into Australian counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine.

The main thrust of the pamphlet *ATOM* and the later *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* was that ultimate success would not be achieved by military means alone. It required a National Plan – what today we would call a ‘whole-of-government’ approach. This National Plan included coordinated political, economic, cultural, social and military effort. The struggle was essentially one for political legitimacy, not territory. Counter-insurgent military action was required to produce a relatively secure environment and to prevent or reduce the insurgents' capacity to interfere, while other elements of government went about delivering a better social, economic and political outcome than the insurgents offered. Through this process it was expected that the insurgents would be isolated from their base of support. As their isolation increased so would they become more vulnerable to counter-insurgent military action.⁶ General Templer coined the phrase ‘winning hearts and minds’ to encapsulate this idea.⁷

The Australian Army subscribed to this policy of ‘winning hearts and minds’. Its doctrinal pamphlet *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* stated: ‘The main part of the struggle is political. Counter insurgency operations are simultaneously political and military in nature. There is no purely military solution.’⁸ The doctrine recognised that without the support of at least a segment of the local population, insurgents could not survive.⁹ The doctrine therefore placed heavy emphasis on defeating insurgent appeal among the population. ‘The National Plan’, it stated, ‘must outstrip the insurgent efforts in each of its facets: political, social, economic and psychological policies as well as diversified military tactics.’¹⁰ In Australian doctrine, population security was the primary aim of the military component of a counter-insurgency campaign. The pamphlet noted that the support of the population required effective military and police operations against the insurgents and that: ‘Support is gained through an active minority. This means that the enemy must first be cleared from a selected area, control obtained, and the population and local leaders won over, as an example of a military and political base from which the counter insurgency effort can be encouraged to spread.’¹¹ Not surprisingly, when it turned to the basic tactical concept to be employed in counter-insurgency, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* placed its main emphasis on population security. These security operations were termed ‘framework operations’, a reflection of the fact that security of the population was the framework upon which the whole military campaign was to be built. The conduct of offensive operations in depth was relegated to last priority.

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ENEMY REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE DOCTRINE

Australian doctrine for counter-revolutionary warfare was in some important ways strikingly similar to that of the insurgents. The doctrine followed by the VC/PAVN was an adaptation of Mao Zedong's strategy for revolutionary war in China, which in turn owed much to earlier thinkers about the nature of war. Mao saw the revolutionary struggle against the oppressor as one combining elements of both conventional forces and guerrilla warfare since China lacked a sophisticated military machine to match its enemy, Japan. In his campaign against the Japanese invaders, Mao advocated a protracted war in which the superior Japanese military machine would be worn down.¹² But despite this strategy of protracted war, at the tactical level, quick and decisive victories should be sought.

Warfare was to be accompanied by political mobilisation described by Mao as 'crucial' and of 'prime importance'.¹³ The concept of protracted war plus political mobilisation produced enormous benefits in China's anti-Japanese campaign. It enabled the Red Army to secure the initiative, and its mobilisation of the people produced a massive base for the collection of intelligence that guided the Red Army to victory over the Japanese and later the Chinese Nationalists. Exploiting this combination of intelligence and the possession of the initiative led to Mao's oft-quoted dictum: 'When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws. In guerrilla strategy, the enemy's rear, flanks and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted and annihilated.'¹⁴

These ideas were embraced by the revolutionary forces in Vietnam. Writing 'instructions' for a conference on guerrilla warfare in July 1952, Ho Chi Minh insisted that when fighting in enemy-occupied areas, large-scale battles must be avoided unless victory was assured. He continued: 'The aim of guerrilla warfare is not to wage large-scale battles and win big victories, but to nibble at the enemy, harass him in such a way that he can neither eat nor sleep in peace, to give him no respite, to wear him out physically and mentally, and finally to annihilate him. Wherever he goes, he should be attacked by our guerrillas, stumble on land mines or be greeted by sniper fire.'¹⁵

General Vo Nguyen Giap echoed Ho Chi Minh's views. Writing about the Viet Minh war against the French, he emphasised the strategy of 'long-term resistance' aimed at maintaining and gradually building his forces