Counterintelligence (CI) has been key to the US Army’s operations since the Revolutionary War. In Vietnam, the traditional tasks of counterespionage, countersabotage, and countersubversion, were critical to protecting American troops and installations. Army CI personnel in South Vietnam also found themselves conducting non-traditional tasks in a tactical setting.

As early as January 1962, the 704th Intelligence Corps Detachment provided CI support to the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV). The unit was collocated with the Vietnamese intelligence service and, therefore, tasked to advise and conduct bilateral CI special operations, such as offensive security operations in the tactical environment. Because American CI personnel lacked Vietnamese language skills and could not blend into the population, partnership with their South Vietnamese counterparts was key to successful operations. With few personnel, however, the Detachment had limited capabilities.

In 1964, Col. George McCutchen arrived in South Vietnam and began building a more adequate CI organization. The mission and personnel of the 704th were absorbed by Company B of the 519th Military Intelligence (MI) Battalion, which later was assimilated into the 135th MI Group. With a greater number of personnel and resources, the 135th deployed CI teams to each province of South Vietnam and the Capital Special Zone.

The 135th MI Group provided technical services in form of personnel and physical security investigations, photographic services, and audio/visual technical intelligence. Special emphasis was placed on investigating Subversion and Espionage Directed Against the US Army (SAEDA) cases and countering the effects of enemy propaganda on American service members. CI personnel also trained newly arrived personnel in the procedures of technical intelligence, SAEDA, military justice, code

Col. George McCutchen strengthened the CI Division at the MACV before his untimely death in late 1965 (US Army photo)
of conduct, arms familiarization, safety, and safeguarding defense information.

The Group’s mission also included monitoring the Missing/Captured Personnel Intelligence Program and reporting critical information on American prisoners of war. Once American prisoners were recovered, CI personnel debriefed and escorted them prior to their removal from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). They obtained perishable information on the enemy order of battle, the condition of other American prisoners, and the location of prisoner camps.

While the MACV’s CI Division deployed teams throughout South Vietnam, tactical divisions and separate brigades deployed to the RVN with their attached MI units, which included limited CI capabilities. The 25th Infantry Division provides a quality example of tactical CI operations in 1968-1969. The Division G2 received 40-50 agent reports per day that he correlated with information from other sources. Agent reports occasionally proved the primary source in providing targets for raids against small units or the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). A VCI Team of CI officers and area-oriented Kit Carson Scouts (Viet Cong defectors) worked with tactical units to develop and exploit VCI targets. Because the Division G2 policy required that intelligence personnel actively participate in the field exploitation of their intelligence, CI personnel accompanied informants on operations. In the G2’s final analysis, the VCI Team paid “high dividends” but cautioned, “the only reasonable assurance of their continuing loyalty is continuous control by the best counterintelligence personnel available.”

Probably the most widely known CI programs of the Vietnam War were the pacification and rural security programs meant to encourage the South Vietnamese populace to protect themselves against Viet Cong (VC) influence or attacks. One of these programs, Phoenix, held that to defeat the enemy in South Vietnam its political infrastructure in the hamlets and villages had to be destroyed. Phoenix was funded and administered by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but was controlled by the South Vietnamese government. US Army CI personnel served assisted their South Vietnamese counterparts in identifying VC targets, planning attacks against the VC’s infrastructure, and interrogating captured targets. Many CI agents worked in the interagency District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers where records from all intelligence-
gathering agencies in the districts were centralized. CI personnel also regularly visited hamlets to evaluate the progress of the pacification effort.

Although Phoenix was plagued by problems with information sharing and the accuracy and quality of intelligence reports, program participants considered it a success. By the 1971 termination of the program, MACV claimed that Phoenix and other rural security and militia programs eliminated nearly 80,000 VC members in South Vietnam through defection, detention, or death. Furthermore, the programs drove the remaining VC political base underground, curtailing effective operations.

Although CI proved adequate during the war, the Army found that CI personnel lacked adequate training in tactical CI operations, not surprising given that most had not been supporting combat divisions in the pre-war years. Although the MI Branch had been created in 1962, the Army still had a shortage of experienced MI officers. Because of the critical need, junior officers had little time for adequate training prior to deployment. CI’s evolution to become more responsive to the tactical commander’s needs triggered a post-war increase in training of tactical CI support to ensure future combat readiness.

**For More Information:**