Army J2s in Vietnam

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During the period between 1950 and 1964, the US attempted to limit its presence in Vietnam to an advisory role. A Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) had been established in 1950 to oversee US military aid to French forces in Indochina. By 1954, after French withdrawal from the region, the MAAG had expanded its mission to reorganizing and training the military forces of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to resist any Communist encroachment. As North Vietnam escalated its efforts in South Vietnam after 1960, the US also enlarged its involvement, quickly outgrowing the capabilities of an assistance group. Consequently, in February 1962, the Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV) was activated. The new unified command supported increased economic assistance, collaboration with the Vietnamese military forces, and operational direction of US forces.

As one of his roles, the MACV commander had responsibility for coordinating American military intelligence in South Vietnam. His headquarters followed conventional military lines, and as such, his Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (ACSI), J2, assumed responsibility for all intelligence operations. Initially, the J2 was an US Air Force (USAF) staff position, despite arguments by the Army that the conflict in Vietnam was essentially a ground war. Consequently, the first two J2s were USAF colonels. By 1964, as President Lyndon Johnson grew increasingly dissatisfied with the poor information coming out of Vietnam, the MACV J2 position was increased to brigadier general rank and shifted to the US Marine Corps. Additionally, the J2 section was doubled in size.

From 1962-1965, the J2 made some progress in establishing collection and counterintelligence efforts in South Vietnam. However, in keeping with MACV’s advisory role, the section focused on enhancing the intelligence capabilities of its South Vietnamese counterparts. For the most part, the J2 section lacked the personnel and other resources to acquire and properly process intelligence received from the Vietnamese. After President Johnson committed US combat troops to the ground war in Vietnam, the J2, like the rest of the MACV, reoriented itself to support active combat operations. At this time, the J2 slot shifted to the US Army. Between July 1965 and the end of US involvement in Vietnam in 1973, the J2 slot was occupied by four consecutive US Army major generals.


Maj. Gen. McChristian arrived in Saigon in July 1965 and immediately began building up the existing intelligence organizations and operations. McChristian was one of relatively few senior officers with intelligence experience in the Army at the time. The MI Branch had only been established three years earlier, but McChristian had served as G2 for Gen. George Patton in 1945 and as the G2 of US Army Pacific (USARPAC) for two years prior to his deployment to Vietnam.
McChristian enjoyed full support from the MACV commander, Gen. William Westmoreland, as well as the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. Consequently, he was given the resources he needed to establish a full-fledged American combat intelligence system in Vietnam. Realizing the importance for American intelligence operations to be combined with those of the South Vietnamese, McChristian created four multinational intelligence organizations to handle interrogations, document exploitation, materiel exploitation, and the processing of intelligence. He also built up the field advisory elements in Vietnamese corps and divisions and exercised operational control over the 525th MI Group, which improved the J2’s capabilities in imagery Intelligence, counterintelligence, and other technical functions.

Maj. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson

McChristian’s redesigned J2 section took nearly two years to become fully operational, by which time he was assigned to command the 2d Armored Division. In May 1967, Maj. Gen. Davidson, a cavalry officer replaced McChristian. Like McChristian, Davidson came to the J2 with a background in intelligence. He had served as an instructor in intelligence at Fort Leavenworth where he co-authored the book *Intelligence is for Commanders*. He had served in Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s G2 section during the Korean War and then commanded the Army Security Agency (ASA) Training Center and School at Fort Devens. In 1965, he had succeeded McChristian as the G2 at USARPAC.

Davidson inherited McChristian’s intelligence organization but made staff changes to meet his own requirements. Davidson’s tenure as J2 lasted from 1967 to 1969 and spanned the commands of both Westmoreland and his successor Gen. Creighton Abrams. This was a particularly contentious period of the war that
elicits controversy even today. Davidson’s contention that McChristian’s estimates of enemy strength were too high landed him in a controversy that shadowed Gen. Westmoreland for years to come. Davidson also served during the prelude to and execution of the Tet Offensive of early 1968. Despite these issues, Davidson’s J2 section did make progress in the fielding of unattended ground sensors, deployment of corps-level Mohawk surveillance aircraft companies and support to what would later become known as the Phoenix Program.

**Maj. Gen. William Potts**

In May 1969, Maj. Gen. Potts replaced Davidson as MACV J2. Potts had had previous intelligence assignments as Chief of Staff of ASA and, like his two predecessors, G2 of USARPAC. An expert on counterinsurgency, he had chaired a special Army study on intelligence against those types of threats.

When Potts arrived in-country, the intelligence organization remained nearly the same as McChristian had built it four years earlier. The organization had matured, however, and many staff members had had previous tours in Vietnam. Potts kept his section manned 24-hours a day to respond quickly to queries from Abrams and his staff. The J2 stored collected information in a comprehensive computer database, which could be used to analyze enemy activity patterns and thus provide more effective targeting of air strikes and ground operations.

Potts served as J2 until mid-1972 when he was promoted to Lieutenant General and became the ACSI at the Department of the Army. As he was leaving Vietnam, the US was also beginning the process of Vietnamization and the withdrawal of US troops. Potts’ priority was to ensure continued support to remaining US forces while at the same time turning the intelligence apparatus over to his South Vietnamese counterpart. This slow process required an extensive directorate of intelligence to remain after many of the American units had redeployed.

**Maj. Gen. George A. Godding**

The last J2 in Vietnam was Maj. Gen. George Godding, who arrived in the summer of 1972 at nearly the same time Gen. Abrams was turning over command of MACV to Gen. Fred C. Weyand. An Infantry officer, Godding also had several intelligence assignments in his background, primarily within the ASA. In 1967, he served as Davidson’s deputy in the MACV J2 and then as the G2 for USARPAC.
By the time Godding arrived in-country, Vietnamization was well underway and the MACV J2 section had been renamed the Directorate of Intelligence within the Vietnam Assistance Command. His primary task was to assist the South Vietnamese in assuming the full intelligence effort. He remained in Vietnam until March 1973.

All four Army J2s went on to higher levels of responsibility after leaving Vietnam. McChristian served on the Army Staff as the ACSI for Gen. Westmoreland, who had become the Army Chief of Staff in 1968. McChristian retired in 1971. Davidson was promoted to Lieutenant General and served as ACSI, also for Westmoreland, from May 1971 to September 1972. Before retiring in 1974, he was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. Potts served little less than a year as the ACSI, also under his former MACV commander, Gen. Abrams, who became Army Chief of Staff in 1972. Then after a year as the Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Potts retired in 1974. Finally, Godding left Vietnam to assume command of the Army Security Agency. He retired in 1975.

For More Information:


Hall of Fame Files for McChristian, Davidson, Potts, and Godding are on file in the USAICoE Command History Office.