Army Intelligence in Vietnam

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The Vietnam War was complex in its origins and followed France’s unsuccessful attempts to restore its colonial dominion over Indochina after World War II. The Viet Minh, a Communist-dominated revolutionary movement led by Ho Chi Minh, waged a political and military struggle for Vietnamese independence. The US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was established in September 1950, and US advisors and military aid were sent to South Vietnam to assist the French against the Viet Minh. However, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap and his Viet Minh military frustrated the efforts of the French and ultimately ousted them from the region in 1954. For the next five years, North Vietnam under Soviet-backed Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam under the US-recognized government of Ngo Dinh Diem symbolized the Cold War standoff between the two world superpowers.

By 1960, the US found itself more deeply involved in the conflict in order to check Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Ho Chi Minh’s People’s Liberation Armed Forces, or Viet Cong, attacked the South Vietnamese Army using guerilla tactics and extended their influence over the population south of the 17th parallel. With the overthrow of Diem in 1963, conditions in South Vietnam became even more unstable.

During the period between 1954 and 1964, the US attempted to limit its presence in Vietnam to an advisory role. The advisors, assigned at the district and unit levels of the South Vietnamese Army, trained and mentored their South Vietnamese counterparts who were fighting the Viet Cong insurgents in the countryside. During this advisory period, the scope of the Army’s intelligence activities was also limited. The Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV), which replaced the MAAG in February 1962, received intelligence support from several Army Intelligence detachments and some two hundred officers serving as advisors. In addition, the Army Security Agency’s (ASA’s) 3d Radio Research Unit provided Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) support with both aerial and ground-based assets.

In late 1964, the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated further after a series of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacks. Moreover, in early 1965, the insurgents stepped up their attacks against US bases in central Vietnam. To protect the American presence, President Lyndon Johnson decided to deploy American ground combat troops. The first US Marine battalion arrived in Vietnam in March and the first Army combat troops, members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, arrived in May. Over the ensuing months, the Army’s troop strength grew to three combat brigades by late July and then to two full combat divisions by early October 1965.

The growing American presence in South Vietnam increased the need for operational intelligence. Maj. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, the MACV Assistant Chief of Staff, J2, oversaw the build-up of intelligence organizations and operations. At the theater level,
his staff directed operations in both the joint and multi-national arenas. Moreover, he realized that it was essential for American intelligence operations to be combined with those of the South Vietnamese. While the Americans could provide manpower, money, equipment, and organization, the South Vietnamese knew the terrain, enemy, and, most importantly, the language. By late 1965, McChristian and his Vietnamese counterpart established four multi-national intelligence organizations: Combined Military Interrogation Center, Combined Document Exploitation Center, Combined Materiel Exploitation Center, and Combined Intelligence Center. Both American and South Vietnamese intelligence personnel worked side-by-side in each of the centers. To further integrate the combined intelligence effort, South Vietnamese intelligence detachments served with American divisions and separate brigades while American detachments served with South Vietnamese divisions.

To plan, direct and conduct general (non-cryptologic) intelligence operations in Vietnam, the Army deployed more than 3,500 intelligence soldiers by June 1967. Working directly under the J2’s operational control, the 525th MI Group supplied the command and control headquarters for two other groups and two battalions. The 136th MI Group provided counterintelligence support, and the 149th MI Group directed collection in the field. The 1st MI Battalion (Aerial Reconnaissance Support) oversaw the Army’s aerial reconnaissance assets as well as interpreted, reproduced, and delivered Air Force imagery to Army units. The 519th MI Battalion provided personnel and support for the four combined intelligence centers. Later in the war, the 136th and 149th MI Groups were inactivated and their operations divided among six provisional battalions stationed throughout South Vietnam. Each of these battalions performed counterintelligence, collection, and direct support functions.

More than 600 American advisors supplemented these intelligence activities. Working with their South Vietnamese counterparts at the district level, they were a source of tactical military intelligence and increasingly became involved in uncovering the Viet Cong infrastructure. This was done through a network of District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers in the countryside.

For SIGINT support, the ASA deployed about one-fifth of its total strength to Southeast Asia. After 1966, the 509th Radio Research Group commanded two radio research battalions, an aviation battalion, and a fixed field station. To provide direct support to
tactical units, the ASA attached specially tailored companies and detachments to American divisions and brigades. These direct support units had a secondary mission to support the theater and national communications intelligence efforts. Additionally, divisional special security officers disseminated the most sensitive intelligence derived from national-level systems. Consequently, intelligence only available to the highest level commanders in World War II was now put to tactical use.

The basis for intelligence support to the tactical commanders remained the interdependent G2/S2 framework. A company-sized MI detachment augmented the division G2 staff with counterintelligence, order of battle, imagery interpretation, and interrogation sections. At the brigade level, smaller 30-man MI detachments supported the S2s. South Vietnamese intelligence detachments complemented both division and brigade MI detachments, supplying critical linguistic expertise.

In Vietnam, Army Intelligence relied heavily on tried and true sources of information such as prisoner interrogation, captured documents and aerial photography. Signals intelligence saw widespread use at both tactical and theater levels. However, new technical innovations came to the fore. Divisions and brigades productively used devices like unattended ground sensors and airborne personnel detectors (“people sniffers”). More important, technological advances greatly enhanced the Army’s aerial reconnaissance assets. Infrared and side-looking airborne radars complemented the more traditional visual and photographic aerial surveillance methods. Likewise, ASA field units increased their effectiveness with newly developed airborne radio direction finding. This increasing use of technology in Vietnam was one of the lasting effects on Army Intelligence.

These intelligence organizations and assets supported US combat forces, which grew to nearly 550,000 personnel, through the next eight years of war. In January 1973, the US, North and South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong signed an armistice that promised a cease fire and national reconciliation. In fact, fighting continued, but MACV was dissolved and all US forces (including advisors) were withdrawn. With American military action in South Vietnam terminated, the South Vietnamese attempted unsuccessfully to fight off several enemy offensives over the next two years. On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell to the Communists.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the commitment of American combat troops to South Vietnam. Throughout 2015, the first “Moments in MI History” column of every month will explore various aspects of MI’s role in the Vietnam conflict.

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