

# Vietnam War Seen Fought in Vain

9/22/75

By George C. Wilson  
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Vietnam war was fought in vain "from a military point of view," the nation's top Marine said yesterday.

Gen. Louis H. Wilson, who became commandant of the Marine Corps July 1, also expressed doubts that any future war would stay limited once a nuclear weapon was fired on the battlefield by either side.

Wilson made those and other comments during a wide-ranging interview at his office in Marine headquarters at the Navy Annex overlooking the white headstones of the Navy Annex Arlington Cemetery.

He appears a thoughtful man, as well as the tough Marine who has vowed to kick the corps into better shape.

His remarks on Vietnam, for example, were tinged with sadness as he answered questions on what the United States and the corps—which had 12,937 men killed in action and 51,392 wounded—gained from the war.

"It bought us nothing whatsoever in retrospect," said Wilson. "In fact, it caused a great polarization among the American people and between the American people and the armed forces."

The historically good relationship between the people and the military "is coming back now," Wilson added, because the majority of Americans recognize that "an armed force is an absolute necessity."

Although the Vietnam war gained the services

some military experience, he added, "it's not the experience I would like to have."

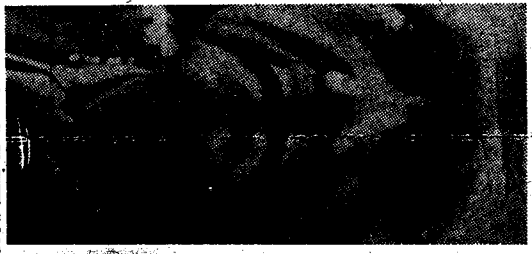
Wilson who won the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism in World War II—served in Vietnam as assistant chief of staff for the 1st Marine Division.

In discussing the mistakes American forces made in Vietnam, Wilson contended "we lost a lot by going out in search and attack units. Had we concentrated more on the office in Marine headquarters to keep up our closeness with the people, we might have done better."

The four-star general said it was "very frustrating" to fight a war under rules which forbade going into the enemy's home ground of North Vietnam or cutting the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. Given those restrictions, Wilson said, "going out and searching and attacking an unseen enemy which could just fade away and come back the next day was very unproductive."

The Marine Corps' plan early in the war was to take over one city after another along the northern coast of South Vietnam, then win the "hearts and minds" of the people by providing security and medical help.

"In retrospect," Wilson conceded, that Marine plan would not have worked, either, because the Saigon government had so little support among the Vietnamese people. But even so, Wilson said, pursuing the coastal strategy would have made more sense than chasing the enemy up and down hills for years under the



GEN. LOUIS H. WILSON  
... new commandant

restrictions imposed on the military. Wilson's remarks on small nuclear weapons—so-called tactical nukes which the Marines could fire through their 8-inch and 155-mm artillery if

ordered to do so—were from the viewpoint of a battlefield commander, not a theoretical policy maker like Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger, who has put fresh emphasis on arming the United States for limited nuclear war.

The commandant said the limited nuclear war found it "very, very difficult to believe" that a nuclear war could be contained once a small nuclear weapon was fired on the battlefield by either side.

"It might be that in the son, should be working to help 'early stages' of a conflict the combat squad and must United States might be able learn to do it better. The special 'to send messages' to an operational training course will get in point, by firing off nuclear weapons, "but that's a political decision which is not my business."

But, on the battlefield, "it would be very difficult to contain" a war "by trading small tactical nukes. Once it starts, it is just like youngsters fighting with a stick. I find it very difficult to believe that we could trade tactical nukes and limit it to a certain point."

"On the other hand," said Wilson, "if the Soviets build small tactical nuclear weapons, the United States must be able to match them in kind or else settle for 'massive retaliation,' which is a political decision."

Asked what changes he intends to make in the Marine Corps, the new commandant said he would push for a tougher and brighter outfit which would forego the frills, such as fighter planes too fancy for the jobs at hand.

The 55-year-old Wilson—6 feet 3 inches tall and weighing 190 pounds—is now demanding that overweight Marines slim down. He has urged them to copy his habit of jogging every morning. Marines will be subjected to frequent physical fitness tests.

Wilson said he will put Marine officers through special training soon to improve their skills in calling in artillery, fighter bombers and reconnaissance aircraft to help a squad of infantry in combat. Everybody from the commandant on down, said Wilson, will be kept in a reasonable cost.

In a reversal of previous Marine policy, Wilson recently decided against buying the F-14 fighter airplane on the grounds the Navy should handle sophisticated enemy planes. The Marines, he decided, should stick with planes that can support troops on the ground as well as serve as fighters. So the Marines, Wilson said, will keep the F-4 until another plane comes along that can do both jobs at a reasonable cost.