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Unconventional Tactics Paid Off for the North

By DREW MIDDLETON

North Vietnam's victory in the South was achieved by conventional forces using unorthodox tactics against forces theoretically superior in numbers, air power and advanced weapons. The last and most decisive

Military
Analysis

campaign of a war that has sparked and sputtered in Indochina since

the Vietminh rose against the French in 1945 went to an army able to deploy forces superior in numbers and drive in every critical engagement, from Ban Me Thuot to Bien Hoa.

The 30-year war ended with a rush but without a final major battle. With President Nguyen Van Thieu's resignation on April 21, Southern resistance dwindled around Saigon's perimeter and in the Mekong River delta, and the capital was delivered to its new masters almost undamaged by bombs or shells.

What lay behind the North's inexorable progress and the South's failures? How much did planning, morale, combat leadership and logistics affect the outcome? Such questions will concern staff colleges for a generation. United States military analysts, who have followed the campaign on a day-to-day basis, believe that some preliminary conclusions may be drawn.

Sometimes Brilliant

The final campaign had a character markedly different from previous operations in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, the most adept practitioners of guerrilla war in Asia, fought in conventional style, but with a mix of weapons that is highly unorthodox by the standards of their Soviet mentors.

In no respect was it a guerrilla war. The Vietcong participated occasionally in small local operations, but the main burden was carried by regular North Vietnamese divisions.

Those divisions fought well, and at times brilliantly, without air support and in the face of potentially strong South Vietnamese air power. Hanoi thus flouted the doctrine, shared by Americans and Russians, that victory lies with the power best capable of combining all arms: aircraft, artillery, tanks and infantry.

The South Vietnamese, once they had partly recovered from the shock of their initial reverses, tried to follow the military doctrine taught by the Americans in the Vietnamization program. This involved a prodigal use of air power, which was not there, lavish artillery preparation, which was inhibited by a shortage of shells, and flexible infantry tactics, in which armor supports riflemen in attacks launched only after the enemy has been sufficiently softened by bombing and shelling.

Better Motivation

Some basic elements in the North's victory are already apparent. Its troops were better motivated and in some respects better equipped. The commanders, although believed to be somewhat surprised by the speed of their early advances, were better able to control large formations than were Saigon's commanders and were able to retain the tactical initiative.

The performance of Saigon's forces was clearly inferior. Liaison from command to field units broke down at critical junctures. Combat leadership was poor—many senior officers left battles while the issue was in doubt—though the performance of company and battalion commanders was somewhat better in the final phases. Staffs, riddled with nepotism, were sluggish.

American officers studying the campaign ask, nonetheless, how a blanket charge of misconduct in battle can be reconciled with the stubborn fighting by the 18th Division and the Airborne Brigade at Xuan Loc? How, they ask, does the contention that the Northerners were omnipotent square with the failure of their superior forces around Tay Ninh to take advantage of gaps in Saigon's defenses?

Strategy Called Sound

The implementation of Saigon's plans, especially in the Central Highlands, was admittedly defective, but the strategy that inspired those plans was not, American officers maintain.

The South, they say, was faced from the outset with a situation in which the North was able to concentrate numerically superior forces where and when it desired. In view of Saigon's theoretical air superiority, this should have been impossible; the Communists' extensive employment of anti-aircraft missiles and guns, plus the decay of the maintenance and service facilities of Saigon's air force, turned an "impossible" into a "possible."

In theory the South held all the aces at the start of the campaign.

The Republic of South Vietnam had a regular army of 450,000 men that included 18 armored battalions and 14 independent artillery battalions. It was supported by 350 rifle battalions in the regional forces, whose strength was put at 325,000, and about 7,500 platoons of the popular forces, for 200,000 more.

An air force of 500 combat craft included 108 F-5A fighters, 220 A-37 fighter-bombers, three gunship squadrons and 625 helicopters.

Weapons left by the Americans included tanks, armored personnel carriers, 1,500 heavy howitzers, 175 heavy self-propelled guns and a number of wire-guided antitank missiles.

The tactical doctrine instilled in the South Vietnamese depended for success on extensive bombing and shelling, which, in turn, required adequate supplies and efficient maintenance. As is turned out, the North had the superior numbers.

As of 1974 army strength was 570,000, without counting the Vietcong battalions established in the South. Included were an artillery division of 10 regiments, 4 armored regiments, 15 surface-to-air mis-

sile regiments and 24 antiaircraft-artillery regiments.

There were more tanks than in Saigon's inventory—900 medium tanks and 60 light ones. Artillery included 800 heavy field pieces and an undetermined number of howitzers. The Soviet Union had also furnished Hanoi with recoilless rifles and an array of mortars and rocket launchers. There were also 8,000 antiaircraft guns.

The air force, the North's weakest weapon, was never used. Of its 200 combat aircraft only 60 MIG-21's designed for interception could be considered modern.

The North's overwhelming advantage, most American analysts agree, was geographical position. There are no official figures on the number of Northern troops in South Vietnam at the start of the campaign; American sources estimate the forces at 140,000, while the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London believes it is 210,000 for South Vietnam, Laos and the Cambodian border areas, plus 10,000 deployed in Cambodia.

The North Vietnamese already in South Vietnam began the campaign. In retrospect military students probably will divide it into three phases.

Prelude in 1974

The prelude came in the autumn of 1974, when the American military advisers to President Nguyen Van Thieu told him that in view of the steady expansion of Northern forces in the area and of what was delicately described as the "inadequacies" of his forces' maintenance and logistics systems, a withdrawal from the Central Highlands might be advisable.

The advice was rejected, but Mr. Thieu reconsidered after the Communist attack on Ban Me Thuot on March 11, when the 23d Division there was badly mauled in the first battle.

The President called a council of war at Cam Ranh on March 14 at which, after a long and apparently disputatious discussion, he ordered the withdrawal of all forces from Pleiku and Kontum, two bastions in the northern highlands, and a retirement to the coast by forces farther north. The President's orders were not detailed, with implementation left to commanders on the spot.

They proved unable to handle the job. Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commanding the II corps, with headquarters at Pleiku, ordered an immediate withdrawal. There was no attempt at orderly retirement protected by combat formations capable of slowing the enemy.

Second Phase Opens

Though President Thieu had envisaged a counterattack at Ban Me Thuot, no attempt was made at a moment when the Communist forces had barely consolidated their gains. Instead the whole corps streamed eastward toward the sea, harried as it went by Communist divisions that were surprised at their good fortune but not too much to shell the retreating columns and the refugees who joined them.

While this situation was developing in the Central Highlands, the North Vietnamese forces farther north, now joined by three fresh divisions from across the 17th Parallel, opened the second phase by launching drives on Quang Tri, Hue and Da Nang, the most important positions north of the Central Highlands.

The exodus of troops and civilians from the Central Highlands and the northernmost provinces was in spate when, on March 22, the Communists began their movement on Hue. Four days later Hue had been abandoned. Da Nang, the country's second largest city, was occupied on March 31. In the first week of April the Communist forces moved inexorably down Route 1, the main coastal highway, toward Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh.

The invaders' strength in these operations remains a matter of conjecture. Vigorous leadership and, apparently, accurate intelligence from sympathizers enabled them to keep the Government forces off balance — an impossible position from which to launch counterattacks.

In some instances the Communists, when they found themselves faced by strong Government forces, simply flowed around them. Days after Da Nang had fallen, about 7,500 Southern troops were still in defensive positions north of the city. Short of food and ammunition, their morale cracked and they fled.

South Vietnam's failure in the northern provinces and the coastal cities cannot be explained, the American sources say, by a single mistake comparable to that of General Thu in the Central Highlands.

Shortages Were Acute

The Government forces, it is conceded, suffered from acute shortages of spare parts, some weapons and some munitions. Expected air support did not appear. Accurate information was scanty and rumors of disaster were rife.

The forces had retired into positions that, given time, could have been turned into defensive enclaves. Still numerically strong, they had not suffered serious casualties and had retained some heavy weapons. But command failed as it had in the highlands and officers fled. Communists who penetrated Government lines spread panic among the troops that few officers did anything to counter.

There seemed little chance of preventing the Communists from overrunning the Saigon area and the Mekong River delta when the third phase began in the first week of April.

Communist operations around Saigon contrasted sharply with those farther north. Strong forces that had been put around Tay Ninh, northeast of the capital, early in the campaign appeared around Xuan Loc in the third week of March, but decisiveness was missing.

The Saigon garrison of three divisions proved much tougher. The invaders' first attacks at Tay Ninh were driven off, and they had to fight for Da Lat, the resort city on the southern edge of the highlands.

Strong Reply in Delta

Government forces in the delta, generally considered the worst equipped in the southern army, fought well enough to prevent a swift overrunning of that area. When the Communist forces cut roads, the Government troops reopened them.

The Northern forces were now encountering troops uninfected by contagious panic and supported to some extent by air power.

On the evidence at hand, the analysts doubt that Hanoi's high command ever intended to besiege or storm Saigon. The political repercussions of a street-to-street battle would have been adverse for forces that came as liberators. What the North did want to do was break the Southern divisions outside Saigon and to cut communications with the capital.

By the end of the first week in April Hanoi had assembled sufficient troops to mount a drive on Saigon through Xuan Loc. The attack was preceded by now-familiar preparations: heavy artillery and rocket bombardment and forays by small groups of combat engineers ordered to destroy communications and command posts in the city. This time it was no so easy.

The South's 18th Division fought well, as did a brigade of the Airborne Division that reinforced it. If, as some believed, the North intended t

U.S. War Casualties

By The Associated Press

Following is a list of casualties in American wars, according to the Defense Department. Figures prior to World War I are based on incomplete data and Confederate figures for the Civil War are estimates.

WAR	BATTLE DEATHS	OTHER DEATHS	WOUNDED
Revolutionary	4,433	Unknown	6,188
War of 1812	2,260	Unknown	4,505
Mexican	17,733	11,550	4,152
Civil War			
Union	140,414	224,097	281,881
Confederate	74,524	85,297	Unknown
Spanish-American	385	2,061	1,662
World War I	53,402	63,114	204,002
World War II	291,557	113,842	607,846
Korean	33,629	20,617	103,284
Vietnam	46,229	10,326	303,654

end the war with a single decisive victory, as the Vietminh did at Dien Bien Phu 20 years earlier, it failed.

Here the superior numbers and mobility of the invaders made the difference. With the 18th and the Airborne pinned

down around Xuan Loc, small groups of Northerners infiltrated the rough country around the city and cut the road behind the defenders. In the end Xuan Loc was not taken but bypassed.

Different tactics prevailed at

Bien Hoa. The Communists' heaviest guns were brought up to shell the South's main operational airfield there. By April 18 the air force began to pull out of Bien Hoa and the invaders undertook a gingerly movement around the city toward Saigon.

Though the neutralization of Bien Hoa as an air base and the isolation of the troops fighting at Xuan Loc were the final Communist victories, the analysts note that they can be considered decisive only in the context of the battle for Saigon. Once the two positions had been dealt with, there was nothing to halt movement to the outskirts of the capital.

By April 23, it is estimated, Hanoi had assembled 120,000 troops in the immediate area of Saigon against a weary garrison of 30,000 regulars. The conditions for successful defense no longer existed.

Campaigns are often won in the first few days and in the reaction to them. In this case the fall of Ban Me Thuot and the subsequent rout in the Central Highlands and the northern provinces led inevitably to ultimate defeat.