

The Enemy Responds

The question of final Presidential approval of the 17-battalion recommendations now became academic as the enemy started attacks that provided the Pentagon and General Westmoreland with a battlefield rationale for their campaign to have American troops take over the major share of the ground war.

As the manpower debates continued in March and April, the study portrays the military situation: "The Vietcong were unusually inactive throughout March and April. There had been no major defeat of the enemy's forces and no signs of any major shift in strategy on his part. Hence it was assumed that he was merely pausing to regroup and to assess the effect of the changed American participation in the war embodied in air strikes and in the marines," the first two battalions deployed at Danang on March 8.

"There were, however, plenty of indications in the early spring of 1965 of what was to come," the study continues. . . . "From throughout the country came reports that Vietcong troops and cadres were moving into central Vietnam and into areas adjacent to the ring of provinces . . . around Saigon."

'A Sobering Harbinger'

"Finally and most ominous of all," the study says, a memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency on April 21, 1965, "reflected the acceptance into the enemy order of battle of one regiment of the 325th PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] division said to be located in Kontum province. The presence of this regular North Vietnamese unit, which had been first reported as early as February, was a sobering harbinger. . . ."

On May 11, when the Vietcong attacked Songbe, the capital of Phuoclong Province, using more than a regiment of troops, "the storm broke in earnest," the study says. The enemy overran the town and the American advisers' compound, causing heavy casualties. After holding the town for a day, the Vietcong withdrew, the study relates.

Later in May, in Quangngai Province in the northern part of South Vietnam, a battalion of Government troops—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—was ambushed and overrun near Bagia, west of Quangngai. Reinforcements were also ambushed.

"The battle," the study says, "dragged on for several days and ended in total defeat for the ARVN. Two battalions were completely decimated. . . . From Bagia came a sense of urgency, at least among some of the senior U.S. officers who had been witness to the battle."

Two Regiments Attack

Then in June, two Vietcong regiments attacked an outpost at Dongxoai and when Government reinforcements were committed "piecemeal" they were "devoured by the enemy" the Pentagon study says.

"By mid-June, 1965," it asserts, "the Vietcong summer offensive was in full stride." By mid-July, the Vietcong were "systematically forcing the GVN to yield what little control it still exercised in rural areas outside the Mekong Delta."

On June 7, after the attack on Bagia, General Westmoreland sent a long message on the military situation and his needs to the Pacific Commander for relay to the Joint Chiefs.

"In pressing their campaign," the general said, "the Vietcong are capable of mounting regimental-size operations in all four ARVN corps areas, and at least battalion-sized attack in virtually all provinces. . . ."

"ARVN forces on the other hand are already experiencing difficulty in coping with this increased VC capability. Desertion rates are inordinately high. Battle losses have been higher than expected; in fact, four ARVN battalions have been rendered ineffective by VC action in the I and II Corps zones. . . ."

"Thus, the GVN/VC force ratios upon which we based our estimate of the situation in March have taken an adverse trend. You will recall that I recommended the deployment of a U.S. division in II Corps to cover the period of the RVNAF build-up and to weight the force ratios in that important area. We assumed at that time that the ARVN battalions would be brought to full strength by now and that the force build-up would proceed on schedule. Neither of these assumptions has materialized. . . ."

"In order to cope with the situation outlined above, I see no course of action open to us except to reinforce our efforts in SVN with additional U.S. or third country forces as rapidly as is practical during the critical weeks ahead."

The '44-Battalion Request'

What General Westmoreland asked for added up to a total force of 44 battalions and the June 7 message became known as the "44-battalion request."

Just as intense internal debate was beginning on the request, there was a "credibility" flare-up deriving from President Johnson's injunction of secrecy on the change of missions for the marines authorized on April 1 in National Security Action Memorandum 328.

"The long official silence between the sanction for U.S. offensive operations contained in NSAM 328 and the final approval [in negotiations with Saigon] of the conditions under which U.S. troops could be committed was not without cost," the study asserts. "The President had admonished each of the N.S.C. members not to allow release of provisions of the NSAM, but the unduly long interregnum inevitably

led to leaks." In addition, the marines had 200 casualties, including 18 killed, as they went about "tidying up," as the study puts it, their newly assigned area in April and May.

"The Commandant of the Marine Corps," the study continues, "raised the tempo of speculation by saying to the press during an inspection trip to Vietnam in April that the marines were not in Vietnam to 'sit on their dittyboxes'—and they were there to 'kill Vietcong.'"

"An honest and superficially innocuous statement by Department of State Press Officer Robert McCloskey on 8 June to the effect that 'American forces would be available for combat support together with Vietnamese forces when and if necessary' produced an immediate response [in the press]."

'By Its Own Petard'

"The White House was hoisted by its own petard. In an attempt to quell the outcry, a statement was issued on the 9th of June which, because of its ambiguity, only served to exacerbate the situation and to widen what was being described as 'the credibility gap.'"

The White House statement said: "There has been no change in the mission of United States ground combat units in Vietnam in recent days or weeks. The President has issued no order of any kind in this regard to General Westmoreland recently or at any other time. The primary mission of these troops is to secure and safeguard important military installations like the air base at Danang. They have the associated mission of . . . patrolling and securing actions in and near the areas thus safeguarded."

"If help is requested by the appropriate Vietnamese commander, General Westmoreland also has authority within the assigned mission to employ those troops in support of Vietnamese forces faced with aggressive attack when other effective reserves are not available and when, in his judgment, the general military situation urgently requires it."

Discussing this statement, the Pentagon analyst says: "The documents do not reveal whether or not the ground rules for engagement of U.S. forces had actually been worked out to everyone's satisfaction at the time of the White House statement. There is good indication that they had not." The analyst also notes that during the battles of Bagia and Dongxoai, the Government forces "were desperately in need of assistance." but that United States forces were not committed although the marines were available for Bagia and the 173d Airborne Brigade for Dongxoai.

The First Major Action

The study reports that the first major ground action by United States forces took place northwest of Saigon from June 27 to June 30, and involved the 173d Airborne Brigade, an Australian battalion and South Vietnamese forces.

"The operation could by no stretch of definition have been described as a reserve reaction," the study says. "It was a search and destroy operation into Vietcong base areas. . . . The excursion was a direct result of the sanction given to General Westmoreland . . . [as a result of National Security Action Memorandum 328 and the enemy offensive] to 'commit U.S. troops to combat, independent of or in conjunction with GVN forces in any situation in which the use of such troops is requested by an appropriate GVN commander and when in [General Westmoreland's] judgment, their use is necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces'."

However, as the study notes, "At that juncture the 44-battalion debate was in full swing and the enclave strategy, as a means to limit the amount and use of U.S. combat force in Vietnam, was certainly overcome by events." and by "a much more ambitious strategy sanctioned by the President."

Recapitulating the situation just before the debate, the study gives this picture of deployment: At the beginning of June, the enclave strategy was in its first stages with Marine Corps forces at Phubai, Danang and Chulai, and Army forces in Vungtau. Other enclaves were under consideration. Approved for deployment—but not all arrived in South Vietnam yet—were approximately 70,000 troops in 13 maneuver battalions; with third-country forces the total came to 77,250 men and 17 maneuver battalions.

This was the situation when, on June 7, General Westmoreland asked for reinforcements "as rapidly as possible."

General Westmoreland's message, the Pentagon study says, "stirred up a veritable hornet's nest in Washington," because his request for large reinforcements and his proposed strategy to go on the offensive "did not contain any of the comfortable restrictions and safeguards which had been part of every strategy debated to date."

"In such a move," the study continues "the specter of U.S. involvement in a major Asian ground war was there for all to see."

Just as Ambassador Taylor had consistently resisted involvement of United States forces, the study says, so General Westmoreland had been equally determined to get the troops into the war and have "a free hand" in using them.

At the time of his message, the general had available in Vietnam seven Marine and 2 Army maneuver battalions, plus an Australian battalion. Now, he was asking for a total of 33 batta-

lions, and if the 173d Airborne Brigade's two battalions—which were on temporary assignment—were added, the total came to 35. But in a subparagraph, General Westmoreland also identified nine other United States battalions that he might request at a later date. Thus the total of 44 battalions, and hence the name given the request. In the total was included an airmobile division of nine battalions to be formed later.

Admiral Sharp favored the request in a message to the Joint Chiefs on June 7, saying, "We will lose by staying in enclaves defending coastal areas."

The Chiefs in Favor

The Joint Chiefs, the Pentagon analyst says, favored bolstering the United States troop commitment. As far back as March 20, the Joint Chiefs had advocated sending three divisions—two American and one Korean—with the objective of "destroying the Vietcong."

Now, the study states, General Westmoreland's request "altered drastically the role of the J.C.S. in the build-up debate.

"Up to that time," the study continues, "the J.C.S. had, if anything, been ahead of General Westmoreland in advocating allied forces for Vietnam. The 27 battalions of their three-division plan were in themselves more than Westmoreland ever requested until 7 June. After that date, the big push came from Westmoreland in Saigon, and the J.C.S were caught in the middle between the latter and the powerful and strident opposition his latest request for forces had surfaced in Washington."

On June 11, the Joint Chiefs cabled Admiral Sharp that something less than General Westmoreland's request was close to approval, but they wanted to know, the study says, "where Westmoreland intended to put this force in Vietnam."

He replied on June 13 in detail and the study comments: "This message was extremely important, for in it [he] spelled out the concept of keeping U.S.

forces away from the people. The search and destroy strategy for U.S. and third country forces which continues to this day and the primary focus of RVNAF on pacification both stem from that concept. In addition, Westmoreland made a big pitch in this cable for a free hand to maneuver the troops around inside the country. . . ."

Confirmation by Taylor

Ambassador Taylor, in a report on June 17, "confirmed the seriousness of the military situation as reported by General Westmoreland and also pointed up the very tenuous hold the new government had on the country." This was the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

"This report apparently helped to remove the last obstacles to consideration of all of the forces mentioned in Westmoreland's request of 7 June," the analyst says.

On June 22, General Wheeler cabled General Westmoreland and asked if the 44 battalions were enough to convince the enemy forces that they could not win. General Westmoreland replied, the study says, "that there was no evidence the VC/DRV would alter their plans regardless of what the U.S. did in the next six months."

"The 44-battalion force should, however, establish a favorable balance of power by the end of the year," the study quotes the general as having said. "If the U.S. was to seize the initiative from the enemy, then further forces would be required into 1966 and beyond. . . ."

On June 26, the general was given authority to commit U.S. forces to battle when he decided they were necessary "to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces."

"This was about as close to a free hand in managing the forces as General Westmoreland was likely to get," the analyst says. "The strategy was finished, and the debate from then on centered on how much force and to what end."