

DREW PEARSON

U.S. Using Cong Tactics on North

SAIGON—A lot of people have asked why the United States does not counter North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam by sending infiltrators into the North. The answer is that we do.

Here are the highlights of how the U.S. is waging an unknown, undercover war in several of the countries bordering South Vietnam.

1. In North Vietnam, American-trained guerrillas are giving Ho Chi Minh a taste of his own tactics. These "gray ghosts," as they're called, are skilled at hit-and-run warfare. They not only create havoc inside the Hanoi dictatorship, but perhaps more important, seek out bombing targets. By radio, they guide U.S. planes to any military concentrations they may spot.

2. Up and down the Ho Chi Minh infiltration route, the Gray Ghosts plant electronic devices to measure the traffic and lay booby traps on the trails. They also act as spotters for attack planes.

3. Along the Laotian and Cambodian borders, mercenaries assigned to the "Special Forces" monitor Viet Cong movements and, upon occasion, ambush Viet Cong patrols. These mercenaries are recruited from as far away as Laos and Thailand. Most, however, are Montagnard tribesmen who have spent their lives in the rugged mountains and rain forests of the region.

4. In the Mekong delta, Navy commandos, known as "Seals," strike the Viet Cong in their lairs. The Seals move swiftly and silently into the deep swamps, hursting in on Viet Cong hideouts, fighting terror with terror. Not long ago they assassinated a Viet Cong leader, then surprised the high-ranking mourners who attended his secret funeral.



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5. In Laos, CIA agents have established village clusters and organized the villagers into militias to defend their homes against Communist encroachment. The CIA has been particularly effective in training Meo tribesmen, who take their families with them to fight against the Communist Pathet Lao. The CIA supplies them by airlift with food and weapons.

6. In Thailand, CIA agents have trained border patrols, organized rural defense programs, and set up joint intelligence centers in the frontier regions to guard against Communist infiltration and subversion. Special Forces, similar to those operating in Vietnam, have also moved into the northern hill country to counteract Red activities among Thailand's Meo tribesmen.

This unorthodox, undercover warfare has been hampered by Army brass hats, who have attempted to take it over. Trained to fight conventional wars, they don't seem to understand guerrilla tactics.

The CIA's anthropologists, for example, had made careful studies of the hill tribes of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. The CIA agents, who were sent to recruit them, understood their language and folkways.

However, the Army through bureaucratic in-fighting, won control of the tribal operation for its Special Forces. The brass hats botched the job in a classic case of military mismanagement. Although the Special Forces are now reasonably effective, they are still treated as outcasts by the generals who learned their tactics at West Point.

In the back rooms of Washington, Vice-President Humphrey has been pressing for greater emphasis on guerrilla tactics.

"THIS STYLE of warfare," he once told me, "is as revolutionary as the first use of gun powder."

He has urged more guerrilla operations in Asia, particularly Vietnam.

"I wish," he said, "that we had ten thousand guerrilla squads operating in North Vietnam."

The brass hats seem at a loss, however, to fit the counter-insurgency forces into their conventional war planning. Result: the Gray Ghosts, Special Forces, Seals, and other underground groups have been tolerated but not exploited.

This is denied by Gen. William Westmoreland's headquarters, which assured me officially that these groups "have special access to the front office." It is always difficult to evaluate secret operations, but insiders insist that the undercover war has been neglected.

Not all guerrilla operations, of course, have been successful. In the jungles of Northern Burma and Thailand, for example, are the remnants of a shadowy Chinese Nationalist band, which the CIA gathered together in the early 1950s. The CIA furnished them with weapons and money, pointed them in the direction of Red China and encouraged them to conduct raids across the border.

THEY WOUND up fighting Burmese government troops more than the Chinese Communists. Finally, they used their CIA subsidy to go into the opium business. Now mid-dead, they have taken wives and settled down. They still make their living in the opium trade. For self protection, they have kept their weapons and organization. Occasionally they will stage a night raid, in Ku Klux Klan style, against some hapless Chinese who has been reported to be pro-Communist.

In Formosa, the CIA, operating as Western Enterprises, Inc., staged commando raids from the offshore islands against the Chinese mainland during the 1950s. They used nationalist commandos, who still launch an occasional raid.

For its surreptitious missions, the CIA uses air America, a subsidized airline, which also flies legitimate commercial flights around Asia. The CIA helps to rustle up business for the line.

The CIA's energetic young agents, because of their political sophistication and linguistic ability, have been more successful than the Special Forces at winning over the jungle and hill tribes of Southeast Asia. But the CIA has also made some horrendous mistakes.

In 1960, CIA operations stuffed ballot boxes and stirred up local uprisings in Laos in order to install their man, Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, as premier. This alienated the neutralist who, for a while, joined forces with the Communists.

Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk, Singapore's Premier Lee Kuan Yew, and Indonesia's ex-president Sukarno were also turned against America by CIA interference in their internal affairs.

The evidence is persuasive, however, that the CIA has learned from past mistakes and is doing a creditable job in Southeast Asia today.