

HELICOPTERS IN THE INDOCHINA WARS: A “POLITICO-MILITARY” CASE STUDY

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People first, guns last. If we have people on our side, then we will have guns. If we have the people, we will have everything.

— Ho Chi Minh¹

THE EVACUATION

It was April 30, 1975, and Saigon had fallen to the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists). While the victorious rejoiced, the conquered faced a grim future with a limited prospect of survival. Fearing a backlash, and begging for help, a few fortunate ones became the boat people of Vietnam bound for the United States of America (USA). They clambered over each other to get onboard the safe confines of any US vessel, using any means possible. Some were lucky to have been airlifted to safety, onboard helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Some of the personnel belonging to the defeated Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) even flew in their own aircraft—many with

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1. Cecil B Currey, *Victory at any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2009), p. 60.

The venerable helicopter had been used extensively in the entire range of operations and had clocked over 12,704,883 hours. A US government report states that 2,066 helicopters were known to have been lost due to various causes, including enemy action, resulting in at least 3,065 fatalities.

their family members—to land aboard the American aircraft carriers. In the ensuing chaos, with limited space aboard the ships, in one case, an ARVN helicopter pilot even intentionally ditched the helicopter adjacent to the ship, jumping out in the nick of time and swam to get to the safety of the ship.²

Between April 26-30, 1975, the helicopters of the Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 (ProvMAG 39) undertook desperate sorties to evacuate both US citizens as well as Vietnamese refugees from Saigon. The ProvMAG helicopters (34 CH53s, 29 CH-46s, 8AH-1Js, 6 UH-1E) flew a total of 682 sorties, including 360 by night and clocked 560 hours of flying and evacuated a total of 6,968 people. Of these, a total of 395 US citizens were airlifted from the compound of the Defence Attache's Office (DAO)³ and 978 US citizens from the American Embassy.⁴

A total of over 58,000⁵ American lives had been lost in the fight that lasted more than two decades (1954-75). Millions of Vietnamese had been killed. North Vietnam and South Vietnam had merged to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

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2. Maj George R. Dunham and Col David A Quinlan, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End 1973-75* (Washington DC: History and Museums Division, HQ US Marine Corps, 1990), p. 215.
3. "Fall of Saigon", Defence Attache Office, https://fallosaigon.org/orig/dao_compound.htm. Accessed on February 15, 2019.
4. Dunham and Quinlan, n. 2 p. 204.
5. National Archives, "Vietnam War US Military Fatal Casualty Statistics", <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>. Accessed on February 24, 2019.
6. Mark Couch and Dennis Lindell, "Study on Rotorcraft Safety and Survivability", <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a547531.pdf>. Accessed on February 17, 2019.
7. Ibid.

at variance with the those put forth by the “Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association” which pegs the figure of the numbers destroyed at 5,086 of the total 12,000 deployed.⁸ According to the same report, 2,165 of the 4,877 fatalities comprised pilots.⁹ The losses and the hours flown are indicative of the extensive role played by helicopters in this war.

The aim of this paper is to focus on the role played by the helicopter in the Indochinese conflict. It is proposed to be undertaken by contextualising its use in terms of the situation in which the contest devolved, from primarily between North and South Vietnam to a direct contest between the Communist North and the most powerful nation, the USA, backing the South. The contest was interesting, as it turned out to be one of conflicting strategies and ideologies.

The concept of Indochina has often been defined in anthropological terms to be a region in which both Indian and Chinese cultures have had their influence. In geographical terms, it is a continental region bound by the Gulfs of Bengal, Siam, Tonkin, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and the Chinese and British Empires of the 19th and 20th centuries.

INDOCHINA: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The concept of Indochina has often been defined in anthropological terms to be a region in which both Indian and Chinese cultures have had their influence. In geographical terms, it is a continental region bound by the Gulfs of Bengal, Siam, Tonkin, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and the Chinese and British Empires of the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁰

Present-day North Vietnam had been a Chinese outer province in 2 BC, and, by 40 AD, anti-China movements had started, succeeding only by 939 AD in an uprising led by Ngo Quyen. At the same time, South Vietnam known as Cochinchina, was ruled by the Hindu Khmers of Cambodia. The northern

8. Pierre Kosmidis, “5,086: Number of Helicopters Destroyed During the Vietnam War”, <http://www.ww2wrecks.com/portfolio/5086-helicopter-losses-during-the-vietnam-war/>. Accessed on February 17, 2019.

9. Ibid.

10. Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (California: University of California Press, 2011), p. 23.

Vietnamese region of Tonkin was invaded by the Mongols in 1284 and by 1406, had become a part of the Ming Empire. Subsequently, after a ten-year guerrilla fight led by Le Loi, the Chinese were defeated in 1418. Thereafter the region was ruled by various rulers indigenous to the region. By the mid-18th century, these Vietnamese rulers expanded southwards and controlled both North and South Vietnam. This was also the period when European traders and missionaries had arrived in the region and had started their work.¹¹

However, there were dynastic quarrels between the various multiple power centres and dynastic factions within the region and these faultlines were exploited by the French who backed Nguyen Anh of the Ngyun dynasty to emerge victorious in these struggles. By the mid-19th century, France had conquered "Cochin China" (South Vietnam), declaring it as the colony, and by 1863, had declared Cambodia as its protectorate. Thereafter, the French gradually consolidated their hold over the region and expanded northwards till Tonkin (bordering China) and also towards Laos. By the year 1900, the French colonisation had been completed with Cochin China (South Vietnam) as a colony and the regions of Annam, Tonkin (North Vietnam), Laos and Cambodia as its protectorates. This region now came to be known as French Indochina.¹²

FRENCH INDOCHINA AND INDOCHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (ICP)

The French administered the region by using the populace to build up a road network and improved the agriculture practices and the health facilities but avoided any political developments from taking place. Higher education was available to less than 5 percent of the local population. The administration at the senior level was totally of French origin and the few Vietnamese (allowed to be educated by the French) were employed at a junior level. The French also had to deal with multiple nationalist movements.¹³ By this

11. Currey, n. 1, pp. 323-329.

12. Maj GG Dwivedi, *War In Vietnam:1945-54* (New Delhi: Magodena Farm House, Hoshiarpur, Chaman Offset Printers,1988), pp. 1-5.

13. Sanderson Beck, "Vietnam & the French", <http://www.san.beck.org/20-10-VietnamandFrench.html> Accessed on February 20, 2019.

time, the Russian revolution had taken place in 1917, and socialist thought had also spread within mainland France.¹⁴

On February 6, 1930, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was formed by Ho Chi Minh¹⁵ in Hong Kong.¹⁶ This was the beginning of a well thought out nationalist revolution against the French colonial power which, at the same time, sought to bring about a class revolution against the “feudalists and *comprador bourgeoisie*”.¹⁷ This ICP thereafter transformed into the Vietnam Workers Party which led the National Democratic Revolution of Vietnam against the French occupation. The resources and active support were provided by the Communist junta of the Soviet Union as well as the Chinese. The ground work and international network was established by Ho Chi Minh by the time World War II started in 1939. This was also the time when Vo Nguyen Giap, later destined to play a key role in the struggle, was recruited by Ho Chi Minh and sent to Kangta in Yunan province of China to attend a course in “political and guerrilla warfare”.¹⁸

The defeat of the French by the Germans and the subsequent establishment of the Vichy government resulted in weakened French control of the entire Indochinese region and the Japanese were granted the right to station troops and aircraft in Indochina in September 1940. Sensing an opportunity, Ho Chi Minh, in May 1941, established the “Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hop (National Front for Independence of Vietnam)” or the Viet Minh, and ordered the Vo Nguyen Giap to organise a Communist military force.¹⁹ The seeds of the first Indochina War had been sown. However, the end of World War II was also recognised by Ho as an opportunity to create an independent “fatherland” of Vietnam.²⁰

14. The Communist International, “Communist Party of France”, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/france/index.htm>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

15. R B Smith, “The Foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party, 1929-1930”, *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 4 (1998), pp. 769-805 (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), https://www.jstor.org/stable/313051?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. Accessed on February 18, 2019.

16. Global Learning: The Indochinese Communist Party, 5/12/2014, <http://www.globallearning-cuba.com/blog-umlthe-view-from-the-southuml/communist-party-of-indochina>. Accessed on February 18, 2019.

17. Ibid.

18. Currey, n. 1, pp. 51-53.

19. Vo Nguyen Giap, “People’s War, People’s Army”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/giap/1961-pwpa.pdf> p.4. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

20. History Matters, “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam”, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5139/>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

In July 1941, the Darlon-Kato Agreement was signed between the Vichy French government and the Japanese, vide which Indochina was integrated into the Japanese military system.

FORMATION OF DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (DRVN)²¹

In July 1941, the Darlon-Kato Agreement²² was signed between the Vichy French government and the Japanese, vide which Indochina was integrated into the Japanese military system. This also resulted in the formation of other anti-Japanese resistance groups such as the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) or the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.

On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh was able to gain the support of Chiang-Kai-Shek (being actively supported by the US) and, at the same time, was able to establish a network of support, especially in the North Vietnamese region of Tonkin. The political aim was to achieve internal unification, with the military objective being that of establishing and equipping well camouflaged and concealed bases. In this, the Viet Minh, also received direct help (American instructors were para-dropped along with a significant quantity of arms and ammunition) from the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS).²³ As World War II progressed, the Viet Minh trained, consolidated and continued to harass both the Japanese and the Vichy French forces.²⁴

As the Japanese faced the prospect of a defeat, they manipulated the Vietnamese masses of Annam province, turning them against the “white occupiers” and on March 9, 1945, dismissed the Vichy French government in an event now known as “March Coup”, while declaring the three states of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam independent. On March 11, 1945, the Emperor of Annam Bao Dai even proclaimed independence under a Japanese protectorate.²⁵

21. Ibid.

22. VNAPI, “The Japanese Presence in Indochina”, <http://www.anapi.asso.fr/index.php/contexte-historique/la-presence-japonaise-en-indochine>. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

23. Currey, n. 1 pp. 89-92.

24. Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, “The MEN ON THE GROUND; THE OSS IN VIETNAM, 1944-1945” https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1488204276530675&disposition=inline. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

25. Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam 1954-1975* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), pp. 13-17.

Ho Chi Minh sensed an opportunity to stamp his authority, and in April 1945, managed to unify all the revolutionary forces under the banner of the Vietnam Liberation Army (VLA). However, his military force, under Vo Giap, consisted of only 5,000 poorly equipped guerrillas.

As World War II ended, the big three i.e. the US, UK and Russia met in Potsdam, near Berlin, Germany, between July 17-August 2, 1945.²⁶ It was decided that the surrender of the Japanese north of the 16th Parallel would be taken by Chiang-Kai-Shek's Chinese forces and south of the 16th parallel by the British forces, effectively dividing Vietnam into two, North and South Vietnam, as an interim measure till such time elections were held.

On August 16, 1945, the Japanese officially handed over control to Bao Dai in Annam and to the United Party in Cochin China. Thereafter, on August 19, 1945, Ho Chi Minh's forces, moving swiftly, entered Hanoi and took over control of the North and, thus, controlled Annam and Tonkin provinces (North Vietnam); on August 25, 1945, Bao Dai abdicated and became chief counsellor to Ho Chi Minh, who, in turn, formed the National Liberation Committee of Vietnam. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of the People's Republic of Vietnam, known as the DRVN.²⁷

In the South, a Vietnamese member of the ICP, Tran Van Giau (along with Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and others), with the tacit understanding of the Japanese, took over control.²⁸ By September 1945, the elements of a British Division (20 Indian Division) landed at Saigon, released all the French prisoners and accepted the surrender of the Japanese troops. On September

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26. History, Potsdam Conference, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/potsdam-conference> Accessed on February 18, 2019.

27. Dwivedi, n. 12, p. 23.

28. Currey, n. 1, p. 105.

25, 1945, Giau's men kidnapped/killed 300 French nationals.²⁹ The situation thereafter rapidly deteriorated and the French sent reinforcements under Gen Le Clerc, and resumed formal military control of the South in January 1946. By February 1946, they reached the 16th parallel to find that after the elections held on January 6, 1946, the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh had gained majority in the North and, thus, had attained legitimacy.

Thus, the French had returned to their post-war colony and protectorates and had to deal with the aftermath of the "March Coup" orchestrated by the Japanese. They forcefully asserted control and thereafter assessed the situation. This can be summarised as follows:

Cambodia: The French had to recognise its formal independence but retained control over major affairs.

Laos: The French suppressed the China backed Lao-Issarak movement and thereafter declared its independence, but here too, they retained control over all major affairs.

Vietnam: Here the French faced an impasse in the form of opposition from Ho Chi Minh who wanted nothing short of a sovereign state: a "dictatorship of the people". There was also the problem with the Chinese not wanting to vacate the Northern Tonkin province. Therefore, by 1946, even though Ho Chi Minh's reputation had spread, there was very little he could do about getting the Chinese nationalists, who had disarmed the Japanese, to leave.

Ho Chi Minh thereafter chose to negotiate with the French between May to September 1946 and allowed them to enter the North (a former French protectorate) with a maximum of 15,000 troops in return for their assured withdrawal over a period of five years. This ensured that the Chinese Nationalists exited the North Vietnam territories and, in exchange, the French recognised the Republic of Vietnam as a free state, having its own government, army and treasury but belonging to the Indochina federation and French Union. The Chinese reluctantly exited owing to the arrival of

29. Daniel Marston, "The 20th Indian Division in French Indo-China, 1945-46: Combined/joint Operations and the 'Fog of War'" <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/forum/pdf/2014/08.pdf> p.106. Accessed on February 24, 2019.

the superior French forces.³⁰ But near simultaneously, Ho Chi Minh ordered Giap to raise a regular army and instinctively knew that the only way to fulfil his dream of a unified Vietnam was to eject the French in an armed conflict. This set the stage for the first Indochina War.

THE VIETNAMESE PROTAGONISTS

Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap were the main protagonists of the Vietnam War. Both were unwilling to settle for anything short of complete unification and freedom from the influence of the Western powers, an all consuming desire to free their “fatherland”.

Ho Chi Minh was born on May 19, 1890, at Hoang Tru, Vietnam, then under the French administration. Before assuming the name Ho Chi Minh, he also used the pseudonyms Nguyen Sinh Cung (this was also his given name), Nguyen Tat Thanh and Nguyen Ai Quoc.³¹ At the age of 20, he worked as a dishwasher and cook aboard a French merchant vessel. At 30, he joined the French Communist Party and, at 40, he founded the Indochinese Communist Party at Hong Kong. At 50 years of age, he entered Vietnam to lead the resistance movement against the French.

Senior Gen Vo Nguyen Giap was born on August 25, 1911.³² Even though he was an intelligent student—in an education system strictly supervised by the French (with less than 5 percent of locals allowed to study beyond elementary school)—a fortunate series of events propelled him towards his destiny. These included him completing his higher education in one of the top institutions of the time, despite having been expelled for the anti-colonist “quit-school” movement and being watched by the “2nd Bureau” of the French secret police for suspected involvement in the dissident movement, under which he was jailed for two years, 1930-32. He, however, managed to survive and joined the Indochina Communist Party and quietly bade his time, till he was called by Ho Chi Minh to raise a guerrilla force for freeing

30. Currey, n. 1, pp. 120-121.

31. Jean Lacoutre, Encyclopedia Britannica, “Ho Chi Minh” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ho-Chi-Minh>. Accessed on February 20, 2019.

32. Currey, n. 1, p. 7.

the “fatherland” on May 3, 1940.³³ Much later, the French started calling him “Nui Lua”, roughly “volcano beneath the snow”³⁴ meaning “a cold exterior but boiling within”, an apt description of his personality, according to those who knew him. This was probably due to the fact that his sister-in-law, wife and father were tortured to death by the French—his wife in 1941 and father in 1947 (after being hounded for years).³⁵ He is also known to have been fascinated by Napoleon Bonaparte and had carried out an extensive study of his campaigns. These war studies provided him the knowledge, while the personal tragedy stoked the fire for revenge.

FIRST WAR OF INDOCHINA

By October 1946, Ho Chi Minh had convened a Constituent Assembly with himself as its leader and Giap as his defence minister.³⁶ By November 1946, Giap had managed to raise an army of 50,000 personnel trained by Japanese deserters.³⁷ The trigger was provided by what is famously called the Haiphong incident, when the Viet Minh and French clashed over a small boat carrying arms for the French.³⁸

By December 19, 1946, the war, which would continue for the next eight years, commenced. Both sides deployed contrasting strategies. The French deployed the principle of “attack swiftly and win swiftly”, while the Viet Minh, employed the counter-strategy of fighting a prolonged resistance war with a focus on building self-reliance, i.e. resorting to guerrilla tactics and hit and run warfare. By the end of 1947, over 1,00,000 French troops were fighting the Viet Minh, using tanks, heavy guns and aircraft.

Meanwhile, in China, by October 1949, Chiang-Kai-Shek had been defeated and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) formed. In January 1950,

33. Currey, n. 1 pp. 30-41.

34. VWAM, “Vo Ngyuen Giap”, <https://vwam.com/vets/nva/giap.html>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

35. Currey, n. 1, pp. 43-44.

36. Pham Diem, Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, “The 1946 Constitution of Vietnam”<http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/the-1946-constitution-of-vietnam-4443.html>. Accessed February 23, 2019.

37. Dwivedi, n. 12, p. 29.

38. World History, “The Haiphong Incident”, <https://www.worldhistory.biz/world-war-i/16465-the-haiphong-incident.html>

both Russia and the PRC recognised Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh government, with Ho Chi Minh now being projected as a Communist statesman fighting French Western imperialism.³⁹ Militarily, the Viet Minh now had access to a free flow of arms, funding and, most importantly, safe sanctuaries inside China, where they could train, rest and recoup. Invigorated, the Viet Minh, thus, decided to seize the initiative, as the French had been forced to reduce the strength of their forces to suppress the rebellion in Madagascar. But they had formed the Vietnam National Army (VNA) to take on the Communist Viet Minh. In order to take on the elusive enemy, the French had also formed mobile groups and parachute battalions which could rapidly be inducted into the conflict zone. A series of battles continued, with the Viet Minh's learning curve, with Giap at the helm, causing severe strain on the French forces.

The Americans also got involved, and by 1950, started providing aid to the French forces. This, in all probability, amounted to nearly \$500 million annually as a part of an allocation of an overall amount of \$10 million approved by President Truman on May 1, 1950, to cover the early shipment of urgently needed military assistance items to Indochina, thus, taking the first crucial decision regarding US military involvement in Vietnam.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the French revised their strategy to that of avoiding decisive engagements with the Viet Minh, expanding the VNA for deployment in defensive duties and to free troops for offensive operations. They also asked for troop reinforcements.⁴¹

The French government opposed the reinforcements and, at the same time, the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance wanted to avoid a Korea-like situation recurring in the Indochinese region as well. However, concerned at the Communist designs, the US agreed to bear 70 percent of the cost of the Indochina War. But this support, while significant,

39. Christoph Giebel, *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2011).

40. The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition, Volume 1, Chapter 4 *U.S. and France in Indo-China, 1950-56* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971) <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent9.htm>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

41. Christopher E. Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-54)* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011), p. xvii.

All the French assessments of the Viet Minh's capabilities proved to be wrong as also the deployment strategy, and the French forces were decisively defeated in a 55-day battle, suffering over 7,184 casualties, with around 11,000 having been captured. In comparison, the Viet Minh suffered over 20,000 casualties with 8,000 having been killed.

was conditional. France was to provide the additional troops, the training of the VNA was to be completed by 1954, and the US advice on the overall strategy was to be followed in fighting the Viet Minh.

The French agreed, and accordingly, 10 French battalions were inducted into the theatre and the French themselves created a French-Vietnamese guerrilla force. Also, the US started sending its advisers to the region.

The Communist bloc, on its part, also sent a Sino-Soviet mission to assist the Viet Minh in January 1954. Viet Minh Gen Vo Nguyen Giap, thereafter cleverly drew the French into the battle of "Dien Bien Phu", by threatening Laos, with which the French had a defence treaty. All the French assessments of the Viet Minh's capabilities proved to be wrong as also the deployment strategy, and the French forces were decisively defeated in a 55-day battle,⁴² suffering over 7,184 casualties, with around 11,000 having been captured. In comparison, the Viet Minh suffered over 20,000 casualties with 8,000 having been killed.

During 1953, with the availability of Chinese Anti-Aircraft (AA) guns, the Viet Minh had shot down over 10 French aircraft, with 240 more having been hit. During the battle at Dien Bien Phu, the French lost 48 planes (14 on the ground), and 167 were damaged.⁴³ The difference between the two sides proved to be the superior man (porter)-based logistics supply chain developed by the Viet Minh, which managed to transport heavy arms and

42. Ibid., pp. 141-148.

43. Charles R Shraeder, "A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945-1954", Book Extract Google Books, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=DNKQCgAAQBAJ&pg=PT372&lp-g=PT372&dq=french+losses+in+Dien+Bien+Phu+48+planes&source=bl&ots=yLabMYOg-Zw&sig=ACfU3U1H0HXDjJWLauPKCC_GDVtDqfTpzA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKew-j2zankn9TgAhUYU30KHYkpAUkQ6AEwDHoECAyQAQ#v=onepage&q=french%20losses%20in%20Dien%20Bien%20Phu%2048%20planes&f=false. Accessed on February 24, 2019.

ammunition and war-like stores over jungle terrain where no roads existed.

The Armistice Agreement was signed on July 21, 1954, and was to be effective from July 23, 1954. Vietnam was again partitioned, this time along the 17th parallel, with the Viet Minh controlling the territory to the North and the Southern half to become the independent state of South Vietnam.⁴⁴

As per the agreement, the Viet Minh were to withdraw north of the 17th parallel. By October 5, 1954, the French handed over Hanoi to the Viet Minh and in South Vietnam, “Ngo Dinh Diem” was appointed prime minister in the Bao Dai government. The Armistice Agreement also had the provision of a political settlement and a general election in both the North and South, with a secret ballot, to be held in July 1956. The Americans were not signatories to the agreement.

During this war, helicopters had already made their presence felt due to the nature of the terrain which extended over 330,000 sq km, with over 45 percent of forested hilly/mountainous area, interspersed with rivers, valleys and fertile plains.⁴⁵

THE HELICOPTER IN THE FIRST WAR OF INDOCHINA

Helicopters were used in the first Indochina War for both Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC) as well as communication duties. The Hiller Model 360 (UH-12A) were the first ones to arrive in Saigon in April 1950 and the first evacuation mission was flown on May 16, 1950, by Lt Santini (who had become the first French military helicopter pilot).⁴⁶ Doctors were trained to be parachutists as well as helicopter pilots, but were in short supply. One

The French applied the lessons learnt in Indochina to fight another eight-year-long war in Algeria, which then became the first war in which helicopters were assigned the combat role by them.

44. Geneva Agreements, “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam 20 Jul 1954” https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

45. CIA, “The World Factbook-Vietnam”, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vn.html>. Accessed on February 19, 2019.

46. “Ventilators” Helicopters in Indo-China (1950-54), <http://indochine54.free.fr/cefeo/helicopt.html>. Accessed on February 19, 2019.

of the pioneers was Valerie Andre who also later promoted to the rank of general, the first woman officer from France so promoted.⁴⁷ Subsequently, in February 1952, seven H-23As arrived , followed by six H-23Bs (March 1952) and eleven WS-51 (December 1952). These were followed up by the induction of 18 Sikorsky H-19s. Having evacuated 10,820 casualties, of the 35-odd helicopters, at least four H-19s were destroyed by the Viet Minh (three by 105 mm artillery shells and one by anti-aircraft fire). A summary of the models and the approximate numbers is as follows.⁴⁸

Table 1

Model Name	Carrying Capacity	Numbers in Service	
Hiller UH-12A(360)/ H-23B Raven	One Pilot Two Litter Cases	UH-12A-Two H-23A-Seven H-23B-6	
Westland-Sikorsky WS-51	Two Pilot Two Litter Cases	Eleven	
Sikorsky H-19A Chicksaw	Two Pilots Six Litter Cases	Eighteen	
Piasecky HUP-2			For carrier- based rescue operations

The French forces had recognised the potential of the helicopter in the combat environs of Vietnam and had planned to induct around 50 H-19s for the reinforcements for the planned campaign for 1954-55. However, the armistice forced the French withdrawal and the campaign ended. Important lessons were, however, learnt by the French and on November 22, 1954, the French Army formed its own aviation branch, with both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. The French applied the lessons learnt in Indochina to fight another eight-year-long war in Algeria, which then became the first war in which helicopters were assigned the combat role by them.⁴⁹

47. Thierry Dubois, "Fighting Girl: Valérie André", Vertical Mag, June 15,2017, <https://www.verticalmag.com/news/fighting-girl-valerie-andre/>. Accessed on February 19, 2019.

48. n. 46.

49. Ibid.

But back in Vietnam, the end of the conflict was not in sight and the dreams of unification remained unfulfilled. Despite the withdrawal of the French forces and the formation of the DRVN, the Indochinese region had now become a zone of conflict between the Communist and Capitalist ideologies.

THE SECOND WAR: PROTAGONISTS ON THE VIETNAMESE CHESSBOARD

After the first Indochinese War, the US government immediately started supporting the Ngo Dinh Diem government (with Bao Dai as the chief of state) in South Vietnam, and, provided both advice as well as economic aid. This was also the period when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had got involved.⁵⁰ The CIA had the task of carrying out systemic sabotage of North Vietnam's transportation and port facilities.⁵¹

Ngo Dinh Diem forced the last of the French troops to leave by April 10, 1956.⁵² The US hand, termed as "inexhaustible treasure", was evident to Ho Chi Minh, as was also the realisation that the promised elections were unlikely to be held.

In September 1955, Ho Chi Minh, in order to unite both the Communist and nationalist forces, constituted the "Fatherland Front of Vietnam", and pushed for unification. The indomitable Gen Vo Ngyuen Giap had also foreseen such an eventuality and had left a substantial network of underground workers, along with the hidden safe zones, in the South intact, while moving his regular troops to the North as per the terms of the armistice. This network was revived and reorganised gradually and was sought to be repressed brutally by the Ngo Dinh Diem-led Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces. The state repression of the ordinary Viet Minh was continued and the citizens were drawn towards the Communist ideology. The Viet Minh were also derogatorily referred to as the Viet Cong or the Vietnamese Communists by the Diem-led ARVN. Over a period of time, the Viet Cong held sway in

50. William S Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* (UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009), p. 60.

51. Currey, n. 1, pp. 215-216, The CIA element left Hanoi along with the last French troops on October 9, 1955.

52. Ibid., p. 225.

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the countryside and the Diem-led government’s control was limited to the population centres and ARVN concentrations. This was a result of the Viet Cong’s strategy in which the ordinary people had a major role to play as a part of its “people first” policy.⁵³

Meanwhile, the nationalists, aiming to oust the foreign power, continued to coordinate their efforts in both North and South Vietnam⁵⁴ and by 1960, the Communist-led National Liberation Front was formed. A guerrilla campaign was thereafter ordered. The guerrillas now initiated a well crafted campaign of terror against lower state officials as well as the ARVN. Every attack was followed by a propaganda team which used to explain to the ordinary villagers why the killing took place. The strategy followed the dictum of Gen Giap which stated:⁵⁵

Political action is the soul of the army. The individual soldier must understand the political and psychological dimensions of the war and of its actions.

Accordingly, he geared up the already tested organisation and gave specific tasks for each of its units which were composed of village guerrillas, combat guerrillas, regional troops and regular troops of the National Liberation Army (NLA). The transformed Viet Cong also received indirect US military aid through subversion of supplies meant for the ARVN.

On the other side, the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG) had been providing assistance to the French and now to the South Vietnamese Army since their 1954 agreement (pre-Dien Bien Phu debacle) with the French. The number of advisers as on December 30, 1960, totalled up to 900 and this number increased to 3,200 in December 1961 and further to 11,300 in direct proportion to the activities of the Vietnamese NLA which was being

53. George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Viet Minh to the Viet Cong* (USA: Praeger Security International, 1961), p. 63.

54. Ibid., p. 66.

55. Ibid., n. 53, p. 77.

controlled basically by the Communists or the Viet Cong.⁵⁶

Gen Giap was also preparing for the inevitable conflict, with a new supply line to the South, with several thousand kilometres of camouflaged road and an air raid shelter every 100 yards, and underwater bridges across streams. A significant portion transited through the Laotian and Cambodian territories bordering South Vietnam/Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

On August 1962, Gen Paul Hoskins of the USMAAG issued orders for his units to take a direct part in the fighting. On September 17, 1962, a ship carrying 33 combat helicopters arrived in Saigon harbour, along with 500 officers and men.⁵⁷ As further engagements continued to ensue on January 2, 1963, during the battle of ApBac, the Viet Cong managed to shoot down five helicopters and caused damage to nine others.

Meanwhile, as most of the Vietnamese consolidated under the influence of Viet Cong propaganda, the religious faultlines in the societal structures came to the fore when Diem—himself a Catholic—banned the Buddhists from celebrating the birthday of Lord Buddha. Subsequent protests by the Buddhists were brutally suppressed which led to a public self-immolation by Thich Quang Duc, a 73-year-old Buddhist monk, on June 11, 1963.⁵⁸ Considering the position of Diem to be untenable, the US, on November 1, 1963, tacitly supported a coup by a few ARVN generals who took over, and murdered Diem.⁵⁹

With no end to the conflict in sight, the US was forced to intervene directly in the conflict and the designation USMAAG was changed to US Military Assistance Command (USMAC) Vietnam.

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56. Currey, n. 1, p. 240.

57. Ibid., p. 241.

58. Rare Historical Photos, "The Burning Monk: 1963" <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/the-burning-monk-1963/>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

59. Currey, n. 1 p. 242.

The stage was set for a showdown between the Viet Cong and the USMAC. The Viet Cong, under Ho Chi Minh and Gen Vo Ngyuen Giap, the main protagonists, had prepared well for the contest. It was in this conundrum that the helicopters were inducted and made their mark, the foundation of which was laid during the first Indochina War. The impact of the helicopters was so profound during this war that there was hardly an image being published without the helicopter in the backdrop.

THE SECOND WAR: HELICOPTER OPERATIONS

On September 5, 1960, the North Vietnamese government under Ho Chi Minh gave public notice of support for the insurgency in the South, stating:

*In the absence of the state elections, only armed conflict will decide the issue.*⁶⁰

The war had begun.

The Viet Cong's preparations for waging war against the "occupiers of the fatherland" were structured along the lines of guerrilla warfare in contrast with those of the USMAAG trained ARVN that had followed Western concepts. The supply route dubbed "the Ho Chi Minh trail" was also ready, as were the promises of support from the Sino-Soviet Communist bloc.⁶¹

In the late 1960s, the first Vietnamese helicopter squadron was raised, equipped with 11 Sikorsky H-34s but they rarely took part in the military operations due to maintenance related issues.

As the situation evolved, the US president sent his military adviser Gen Maxwell Taylor in 1961, to assess the situation.⁶² Based upon the reported lack of mobility of the ARVN troops, President Kennedy ordered the deployment of two companies (8th and 57th Transport Companies) to deploy to Vietnam. Operating the Piasecki H-21 Shawnee (nicknamed "Flying Banana) helicopters, both these units reached Saigon on December

60. Ibid., p. 238.

61. History.com, "Ho Chi Minh Trail", <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-jets-bomb-ho-chi-minh-trail> accessed on February 23, 2019.

62. Jim Mesko, *Air Mobile*, Vietnam Studies Group, (Texas: Squadron/Signal Publications, Inc., 1984).

11, 1961, aboard the ship USNS *Card*. The helicopters, within two weeks of their arrival, and operating from Tan Son Nhut airport, north of Saigon, undertook their first operation against the Viet Cong named, "Operation Chopper".⁶³ They airlifted over 1,000 paratroopers into a suspected enemy base complex which became the first of the series of "air mobile" operations, forcing the Viet Cong to reassess and devise a counter-strategy. The demand for more such operations tested the single engine H-21's limited range and, thus, additional support in terms of the 93rd Transport Company was sent, along with fixed-wing Otters of the 8th Transport Company to provide utility support to the maintenance intensive helicopter operations. For further command and control support, these transportation companies were supported by the 45th Transportation Battalion. This was done prior to the induction of two more companies operating the H-21 which brought the total number of transportation companies operating the H-21 to five by mid-1962.⁶⁴

With the increase in the number of Americans involved in the operations, the Bell UH-1 (Huey) helicopters were inducted for Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC)/medical support. The helicopters belonged to the 57th Medical Detachment.

In April 1962, the first Marine Squadron HMM-362, equipped with the H-34s, deployed at Da Nang. This was done as the area of operations against the Viet Cong had expanded in the mountainous regions in the North where the H-21s could not be deployed due to their operational limitations.

The only armament which the H-21 was configured with was a .30 calibre door mounted machine gun which had a limited firing arc. And with the Viet Cong now revising their tactics, after observing the vulnerabilities of the H-21, the need for better armaments aboard the helicopter, thus, became a necessary imperative.

63. "This Day in Aviation", <https://www.thisdayinaviation.com/tag/operation-chopper/> accessed on February 23, 2019.

64. Mesko, n. 62.

The Viet Cong under Giap had devised a counter-strategy and had started causing helicopter losses due to ground fire. Thus, an acute need was felt for these helicopters to be configured with the necessary armaments to respond.

ARMING THE HELICOPTER

While the effectiveness of the concept of air mobility had been proven, with the Viet Cong having been surprised and caught flat-footed, the vulnerabilities of the helicopter were also exposed, especially during the landing phase and while disembarking the troops.

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respond.⁶⁵

A few years earlier, between June 1956 and 1958, Col Jay Vanderpool of the US military had conducted numerous experiments with a variety of helicopters and weapons in the US.⁶⁶ The success of these had resulted in the army convening a study named the "Rogers Board" to study the proposals for the possible expansion of army aviation.⁶⁷ This study was succeeded by the "Howze Board" in spring 1962 to study the concept of air mobility of troops. With the available combat experience of the operations in 1962, the "Howze Board"⁶⁸ report, which had been submitted in August 1962, was made a basis for establishing an Air Assault Division and the Air Cavalry Brigade by replacing the wheeled vehicles with helicopters and light aircraft. Additionally, the artillery and armour element was replaced by armed helicopters and OV-1 Mohawk aircraft. The orders to "organise, train and test" these units were thereafter issued in January 1963.

65. Currey, n. 1, p. 258.

66. Joseph Trevithick, "The US Army Designed One of the First Helicopter Gunships On a Napkin", <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/the-u-s-army-designed-one-of-the-first-helicopter-gunships-on-a-napkin-c15c50b8a53>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

67. Mark Albertson, "Army Aviation in Vietnam-The Rogers Board", <http://www.armyaviationmagazine.com/index.php/history/not-so-current-2/713-army-aviation-in-vietnam-the-rogers-board>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

68. J A Stockfish, "The 1962 Howze Board and Army Combat Developments", <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a282756.pdf>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

However, back in the Vietnam war zone, a plan for arming the helicopter was already being tested, involving the Hueys. These tests were undertaken by a new unit called the Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTTCO), with 15 UH-1A helicopters configured with two .30 calibre machine guns and sixteen 2.75 inch rockets.⁶⁹ These were deployed to support operations by the H-21s. However, the UH-1A was underpowered for the retrofit, especially while flying with a full weapon load and fuel, restricting its operational deployment, as any deviation from the escorts would result in no possibility of these escorts catching up with the formation. Therefore, additional UH-1Bs with more powerful engines, were inducted by November 1962, with factory fitted M-60 machine guns. They undertook the escort missions and these armed missions resulted in a significant drop in the “hit rate” or the number of times the Viet Cong managed to hit helicopters. The success of these escorts resulted in the Marine H-34s also requesting for these armed escorts.

However, the Viet Cong too had adapted. On January 2, 1963, they managed to shoot down four H-21s (of a total of 10) and an armed Huey escort (of a total of five) during an operation near the ApBac village. Over nine helicopters of the remaining ten were also damaged.⁷⁰ The Viet Cong broke off the engagement only after the Vietnamese and US Air Force (USAF) fixed-wing aircraft were called, with bombs, rockets and napalm. Thus, a vital lesson of the importance of the ready availability of fixed-wing support from the USAF was learnt.

69. Mesko, n. 62.

70. Currey, n. 1.

HELICOPTER OPERATIONS AND A PERIOD OF POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

The year 1963 was important for another reason. Vietnamese President Diem was killed in a coup on November 1, 1963 (with the tacit support of the US, as covered earlier) and the US president was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Vice President Lyndon B Johnson took over as the US president.

The resultant uncertainty and the political turmoil gave space to the Viet Cong to consolidate and continue the battle of attrition against the US backed ARVN. The tactics included enticing the helicopters to land in an area where an ambush had been laid. They did this by using captured US radio sets over which they monitored the colour of the smoke marker requested by the pilots and lighting up the correct marker at the ambush site.⁷¹ Some of the landing zones had hidden pointed sticks and obstacles also, which caused significant damage to the aircraft and injuries to the personnel. In some cases, they attacked a remote outpost and thereafter waited for the helicopter-borne relief force which would then be ambushed from gun emplacements on the hillside.⁷²

Faced with mounting losses, the downed helicopters needed to be repaired and recovered, if possible. This aspect was addressed with the induction of the Sikorsky H-37 heavy-lift helicopters in 1964.

The US now was well aware, and knew that the root cause of the problem lay in the Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin incident was a perfect excuse to expand the envelope of US involvement.

THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT: DESOTO MISSIONS AND OPLAN 4-A

DeHaven Special Operations off Tsingtao or DESOTO missions were highly classified intelligence gathering freedom of navigation missions carried out in the areas where the presence of the US Seventh Fleet had been restricted and initially were started in the contested waters off the Chinese coast.⁷³

71. Tanham, n. 53, p. 88.

72. Ibid.

73. RAdm, James W. Montgomery, U.S. Navy (Retd), http://ussdehaven.org/first_desoto_patrol.htm. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

One such mission, off the coast of the DVRN, was undertaken by the USS *Craig* (DD-885) in March 1964.⁷⁴

Under OPLAN 34-A, approved by President Kennedy just prior to his assassination in November 1963, commando raids were authorised to be undertaken into North Vietnam from the Da Nang base, duly supported by intelligence support by naval ships. These were contested by the North Vietnamese.

By a queer chance of fate, the area of conduct of two separate missions (one each under DESOTO and OPLAN 34A) and unknown to each other, coincided on August 2, 1964. The North Vietnamese attacked the US vessel undertaking the freedom of navigation mission mistaking it for a commando raid. The DESOTO ship, USS *Maddox* engaged the torpedo boats and also called for air strikes. On August 4, 1964, mistaking the recovery of the damaged torpedo boat as another attack, the US president thereafter authorised limited strikes on North Vietnamese territory, which were undertaken on August 5, 1964. The response by the DVRN was to position 30 MiGs from China into Phuc Yen airfield on August 7, 1964.⁷⁵ The escalatory ladder had been initiated with demands being placed for air support in various targets in Laos. The initial “tit-for-tat” missions were replaced with full scale air strikes against the North Vietnamese targets. The first of these strikes was conducted in February 1965.⁷⁶ It was only a matter of time that the American air power was now fully committed.

AMERICAN TROOP BUILD-UP AND FORMATION OF 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIR MOBILE)

Even though the US special forces had been operating in South Vietnam since 1961, the ARVN forces were clearly in need of help. The US, therefore, committed additional ground forces to proceed to the region. Two US Marine battalions carried out an amphibious assault landing on Da Nang beach on March 8, 1965, only to be welcomed by garlands by the locals. This was

74. Carl Otis Schuster, “Case Closed: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident”, <https://www.historynet.com/case-closed-the-gulf-of-tonkin-incident.htm>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

75. Gen William W. Momyer, *Airpower in Three Wars* (US: Department of the Air Force: 1978), p. 15.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The CH-47 was a troop carrier and the CH-54 helicopter, besides being used to airlift specially designed detachable pods to be used as a communications facility, surgical room or a supply container, could also be used to deliver a 10,000 pound bomb on targets.

followed by more troops such as the 173rd Airborne Brigade which was positioned in May 1965 to provide protection to the air bases at Bien Hoa and Vung Tau. This brigade was the first to undertake two air assaults involving a large number of troops by using helicopters drawn from many helicopter companies (units) in June and July 1965.

The assessed success of these operations thereafter resulted in the formation of the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) on July 1, 1965, which was inducted into AnKhe, Vietnam, on October 3, 1965. The new equipment which arrived in Vietnam now included the Sikorsky CH-47 (Chinook) and the Sikorsky CH-54 Skycrane heavy-lift helicopter. The CH-47 was a troop carrier and the CH-54 helicopter, besides being used to airlift specially designed detachable pods to be used as a communications facility, surgical room or a supply container, could also be used to deliver a 10,000 pound bomb on targets.

The 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) was the result of the Howze Board recommendations having been tested by a test unit called 11th Air Assault Division. This test unit, constituted in the US, developed tactics initially during various small scale exercises and derived inputs from the *"constant exchange of people, information and equipment between the units in Vietnam and the 11th Air Assault Division staff"*.⁷⁷ In the last quarter of 1964, the concepts were tested in Carolina as a part of an exercise called "Air Assault-II" which involved over 35,000 men. It was apparent that the battle of attrition in Vietnam needed an infusion of fresh tactics, in which the helicopters were to play a major part.

TACTICS AND COUNTER-MEASURES

The frustrations of the US troops and the success of the Viet Cong tactics could be ascertained from the following statement by a US Army officer:

77. Mesko, n. 62, p. 17.

*If the elusive Vietcong would just stand still and fight or form larger units and stop using ambush technique, the AVRN could handle them.*⁷⁸

The statement reflected the need for an alternate approach as a means to counter the Viet Cong menace. The response by Gen Westmoreland was on the lines employed by the French during the first war: a rapid response in strength to a situation by highly mobile forces to counter the Viet Cong, along with a disruption of their supply lines. The 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) was the centrepiece of the effort.

The first battle test for the air mobile concept was in the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965, wherein search and destroy missions resulted in large force engagements with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the advantage of the foot mobility of the enemy and his use of terrain was neutralised by the air mobility accorded by the helicopters.

The Viet Cong, understanding the dangers posed by the helicopters, then resorted to night attacks and infiltration, using the cover of darkness in order to attack air bases. This was countered by fitting the helicopters (UH1B Huey, nicknamed "Lightning Bugs") with C-130 landing lights and illuminating the perimeter to, thus, target the attackers.

Henceforth, the initiative was wrested from the Viet Cong and NVA regular forces by combining the air mobile forces with the ground forces to attack troop concentrations. During these assaults, commencing in January 1966, the helicopters, besides moving troops, and the armed helicopters in both the scout and attack roles, also helped provide artillery cover to the ground forces by moving artillery guns into temporary "fire bases" from

With rapid diversification and rotation of pilots resulting in varied training procedures and non-standardised methods of operational employment, a need was felt for a centralised unit to focus on these aspects. This responsibility to standardise training, procedures and methods of operation was thereafter entrusted to the 1st Aviation Brigade, formed on March 1, 1966.

78. Tanham, n. 53, p. 80.

which they provided cover to the ground forces. The Viet Cong thereafter adopted tactics to either remain beyond, or under, the ranges of artillery fire bases to counter these.

With rapid diversification and rotation of pilots resulting in varied training procedures and non-standardised methods of operational employment, a need was felt for a centralised unit to focus on these aspects. This responsibility to standardise training, procedures and methods of operation was thereafter entrusted to the 1st Aviation Brigade, formed on March 1, 1966. For maintenance support, a former navy tender *Albermale* was requisitioned and renamed as *Corpus Christi Bay*. It became an “army aircraft carrier” and was manned by a civilian crew and staffed by army technicians to undertake repairs and rectification of helicopters. It reached the area of operations in the spring of 1966 and was moored in the bay at Qui Nhon and later at Vung Tau (1967-69).⁷⁹

By 1967, the strain on man and machine was beginning to tell and the shortage of pilots as well as of helicopters was being felt, with many more divisions such as the 101st Airborne Division being in the process of being converted into air mobile status. Helicopters had proven themselves to be indispensable in cutting off the escape routes of NVA units and in searching for, and destroying, enemy bases.

The NVA and Viet Cong were forced to go back to resorting to ambush tactics rather than undertaking assaults in concentration.

To avoid wasteful effort and cover a wider area of operations, a concept of red, white, pink and blue teams was developed. A red team was composed of two gunship helicopters whereas the white team had two helicopters in a reconnaissance/scout role. In this role, while one helicopter would be at low level looking for the enemy, the other was at a height to act as a cover and a communication relay. The pink team would be a combination of a low flying observation/scout helicopter which would look for targets and draw fire while the gunship helicopter would be holding overhead in a circular pattern. The blue team would consist of a number of Huey “slicks” which would be carrying a rifle

79. Mesko, n. 62 and NavSource Online: Service Ship Photo Archive, “USNS Corpus Christi Bay (T-ARVH-1), <http://www.navsource.org/archives/09/41/4105.htm>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

platoon or a ground cavalry group. The blue and pink teams combination was the most favoured, with the best area of operation within reach of an artillery fire base. These teams could always be in the air or in a position on the ground, ready to activate in case of “contact” with the enemy.⁸⁰

These efforts were proving to be very effective in countering both the NVA regulars as well as the Viet Cong. It was in September 1967 that the dedicated attack helicopters, the AH-1G “Cobras” were received by the New Equipment Training Team (NETT) of the 1st Aviation Brigade. These Bell manufactured helicopters had the necessary speed, manoeuvrability and firepower to do the job required. Their success on the battlefield resulted in them replacing all the armed Hueys by the late 1960s. The dedicated attack helicopter had arrived in the battlefield along with the Hughes OH-6A Cayuse light observation helicopter, which also found favour with the operating crew instead of the older OH-13 and 23, due to its ruggedness and dependability. The Viet Cong was forced to retreat to camps in Cambodia and Laos to regroup. Whenever the NVA attacked, the helicopter was used by Gen Westmoreland to effectively build up troop concentration and prevent the enemy from achieving its aims. The NVA and Viet Cong continued to resist fiercely, but the helicopters with their flexibility of use, proved to be more than a match. However, Giap studied the US military strategy to devise a counter-strategy. He instructed his troops to remain concealed in bunkers and tunnels till the bombing by the fixed-wing aircraft and the armed helicopters was over. The Viet Cong and NVA regulars emerged from their hideouts only when the helicopters started bringing in troops to engage them. As one of the Vietnamese Generals, Nguyen Xuan Hoang stated later in an interview:⁸¹

In Vietnam, your commanders never realised that there are limitations of power, limitations on strength.... the most intelligent of men can do the stupidest thingswe never stopped winning the war. Time was on our side. We did not have to

80. www.army.mil/IaDrang-October-November1965, http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH_2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/vietnam/tactical/chapter2.htm. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

81. Currey, n. 1, p. 258.

defeat you militarily; we only had to avoid losing. A victory by your brave soldiers meant nothing, did nothing to change the balance of forces or bring you any closer to victory.

Then, Gen Giap was directed, by the Politburo led by Ho Chi Minh, to undertake a dramatic attack against his better judgement, with an aim to reveal the weakness of the government in the South and force the US to withdraw.⁸² This was backed by balancing the Chinese and Soviet interests. The Chinese help included over 100,000 logistic troops which increased the number of combat troops. The Soviets also promised shipments of armour and other weapons.⁸³ The Tet offensive was, therefore, conceived.

THE TET OFFENSIVE AND THE “MONKEY TRAP”

The Tet or the Vietnamese New Year, which is based on the lunar calendar is a major festival celebrated across Vietnam [Tết Nguyên Đán (𑜉𑜂𑜫𑜪𑜫)], which is Sino-Vietnamese for “Feast of the First Morning of the First Day”]. The three-day festival was to be celebrated on January 31, 1968. A majority of the AVRN troops were on holiday. The meticulously planned operation was put into motion well before the Tet holiday. The AVRN and US intelligence was deceived into responding to a reported attack on the lines of the “Dien Bien Phu” attack on the French during March 1954. Only this time, it was reported by the US intelligence that the NVA and Viet Cong were concentrating around the US Marine base at Khe Sanh. Accordingly, Gen Westmoreland moved major elements of the 1st Cavalry to the Khe Sanh base, with all the elements now reoriented towards the threatened area. However, on January 31, 1968, the Viet Cong and NVA in substantial numbers attacked over 100 carefully selected strategic locations (including in 38 cities and towns) simultaneously, throughout the country.⁸⁴ This included the US Embassy in Saigon, along with office complexes and supply depots, which were usually lightly defended. The surprise was complete and the perimeter was breached in many heavily defended areas also. However, in the ensuing two days of fighting, the

82. Ibid., p. 269.

83. Currey, n. 1, p. 265.

84. William Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World* (Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2008), pp. 270-274.

helicopters, especially the AH-1G Cobras, played a key role, with the Hueys dropping troops and reinforcing the defenders wherever necessary.

Gen Westmoreland, however, remained convinced that the main attack was still going to take place on Khe Sanh. Concentrating on Khe Sanh, a major large-scale air assault operation codenamed “Pegasus” was launched on April 1, 1968, but achieved very little. The “trenches” which appeared to have been formidable from the aerial photographs/observations and indicative of a massive troop build-up, were only 14 to 20 inches deep and obviously a part of a ruse. Gen Westmoreland, probably still desperate for success, thereafter committed his force of helicopters to operations in the “A Shau Valley” as a part of Operation Delaware. He committed both the 1st Cavalry and the 101st Airborne Division from April 19, 1968, onwards. The results were mixed at best, with the enemy losses at 900 against 100 allied soldiers killed, with an extensive cache of arms and other stores having been captured, at a cost of the loss of 21 helicopters and damage to most of the others involved.⁸⁵ It is likely that the supply depot was lightly defended, with the major force having been clandestinely positioned for the “Tet Offensive”.

The NVA military successes included taking over the town of Hue which was the old imperial capital, and the destruction of almost 100 aircraft and helicopters on the ground, besides the freeing of prisoners. Its repeated appeals over Radio Hanoi of a general uprising had no effect. The failure of the offensive resulted in over 40,000 Viet Cong casualties compared to 1,100 US soldiers and 2,300 AVRN soldiers killed in action. Over a million people throughout the South lost their homes.⁸⁶

Even though the cleverly planned offensive, based on the Napoleonic strategy of splitting the superior enemy into several parts and attacking the “centre of gravity” with a superior force, as well as that of the “Monkey Trap”⁸⁷ (with Khe

85. Mesco, n. 62, p. 45.

86. Currey, n. 1, p. 269.

87. Gen Giap explained the strategy akin to how the Vietnamese monkey hunters used to catch monkeys by boring a hole in a coconut, placing a shiny bead inside it and leaving it where the monkey was last seen. A monkey seeing the bead would reach for it but the hole would be too small for the animal’s clenched fist to pass through. But monkey wouldn’t let go of the bead and, weighed down by the coconut, he would be easily caught by the hunter. A variation of the technique using an earthen pot and black gram is also used by Indian monkey hunters too.

Even though the cleverly planned offensive, based on the Napoleonic strategy of splitting the superior enemy into several parts and attacking the “centre of gravity” with superior force, as well as that of the “Monkey Trap” was defeated, it still yielded unexpected results for the DRVN dream of a unification. The failure was on account of the swift US response led by the rapid mobility accorded by the helicopters.

Sanh as a bait), was defeated, it still yielded unexpected results for the DRVN dream of a unification. The failure was on account of the swift US response led by the rapid mobility accorded by the helicopters.

THE FALLOUT

The failed Tet offensive had an impact on the psychology of the US populace as well as on the political landscape in the US. War reports being filed by the correspondents only fanned the resentment in the US against the war. The US measured its success on the enemy body counts and fed the public its “domino theory” of the spread of Communism in all of Southeast Asia.

The enforcing of the compulsory military draft was not helping the cause. It was in this background that the story of the failed “Tet Offensive” was broken to the American public and the public sentiment began to doubt the official reports about the progress of the war. The Administration of President Lyndon Johnson yielded, with a promise of not running for a second term, on March 31, 1968. The US began negotiations with the North on May 13, 1968, in Paris. The US policy drifted back towards “Vietnamisation of the War”,⁸⁸ a policy in which the ARVN was to conduct its own war albeit with US support. A rather diplomatic way of conceding defeat and announcing a withdrawal.

THE “VIETNAMISATION OF THE WAR” PHASE

A plan termed as “*jaunissement*” (yellowing, as described by the French in its

88. kuba, “The ‘Secret Plan’ of Nixon”, <https://thevietnamwar.info/vietnamization-theory-reality/>. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

earlier *avatar* of 1951)⁸⁹ was put into effect by President Nixon, who had won the presidential election on the poll plank of ending the war. The negotiations in Paris were the key. However, the North launched another Tet offensive on February 22, 1969. Despite suffering heavy losses, the Viet Cong had killed 1,100 Americans. On March 18, 1969, President Nixon, without the permission of the Senate or the Congress, ordered a bombing campaign codenamed "Operation Menu". It involved secretly bombing the Viet Cong's and People's Liberation Army's sanctuaries inside Cambodia.⁹⁰ The B-52s operating from Guam dropped 5,50,000 tons of explosives till 1973.⁹¹ On June 8, 1969, the US, claiming that Vietnamisation was working, ordered withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Division from Vietnam.

A peace treaty was finally signed in January 1973, and under the agreement, US military personnel were withdrawn. The helicopter operations reduced further owing to the threat posed by the SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles.

REDUCTION IN COMBAT POWER :ROLE OF HELICOPTERS

The Viet Cong had shifted base into Cambodia (the reason for the B-52 bombings) from where they were back to guerrilla tactics and the helicopters were moved closer to the Cambodian border to counter the threat. With reductions in the troop levels, the helicopter support attained even more significance. However, the last of the major air mobile operations undertaken by the ARVN troops, with US backing, was against the supply routes of the NVA in Laotian territory. The operation codenamed "LamSon 719," undertaken between January and March 1971, resulted in the loss of 168 helicopters, with another 618 being damaged. As the operation ended, over 55 US aircrew were killed, 178 wounded, and 34 were missing in action.⁹²

89. Spencer C Tucker, "Vietnam", [https://books.google.co.in/books?id=WZry2NaH2_sC&dq=jaunissement+yellowing+\(as+described+by+the+French\)&source=gbs_navlinks_s](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=WZry2NaH2_sC&dq=jaunissement+yellowing+(as+described+by+the+French)&source=gbs_navlinks_s) p. 61.

90. Anthony Lewis, "Menu For Disaster", October 4, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/04/archives/menu-for-disaster.html>. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

91. William P. Head, "War From Above the Clouds: B-52 Operations during the Second Indochina War", https://media.defense.gov/2017/May/05/2001742911/-1/-1/0/FP_0007_HEAD_WAR_FROM_ABOVE_CLOUDS.PDF. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

92. DEWEY CANYON II / LAM SON 719, 29 JAN 1971-6 APR 1971, <https://one-six-one.fifthinfantrydivision.com/161pg12a.htm>. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

The losses could be attributed to a combination of factors, including better anti-aircraft weaponry as well as the weather and lack of fixed-wing air support. But the greatest number of losses were of the ageing UH-1 Hueys, especially when compared to the AH-1G Cobras.

By 1972, the bulk of the US forces had been withdrawn from South Vietnam. However, a few helicopter units remained to aid the Vietnamese. The attacks by the NVA were relentless and now consisted of armoured assaults using PT-76 and T-54 tanks. These were repulsed with the aid of the US-led air strikes. However, by now, three UH-1Bs were configured with Tube-Launched, Optically Guided, Wire-Guided (TOW) anti-tank missiles. These were tested during the armour thrusts, with 26 tank kills having been reported.

A peace treaty was finally signed in January 1973, and under the agreement, US military personnel were withdrawn. The helicopter operations reduced further owing to the threat posed by the SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles. But it was only a matter of time when the NVA overwhelmed all resistance by the AVRN and entered Saigon in April 1975, triggering the evacuation of the remaining Americans.

A FEW STATISTICS

A report was presented during the impeachment hearings of President Nixon in the US House of Representatives, giving an account of the total munitions expended by all American aircraft, including by helicopter gunships and C-130s; it was as follows:⁹³

Table 2

US Aerial Munitions Expended (In Tons)	
DRV	8,80,108
RVN	32,02,952
Laos	20,93,300
Cambodia	5,39,098
Total	67,15,458

93. Turley, n. 50, pp. 123-124.

In addition, the contingents of Australia and New Zealand also dropped 1.4 million additional tons of aerial munitions, taking the total load dropped to 8 million tons. This was more than double of what all the aircraft had dropped in the entire World War II. Most of it was dropped in South Vietnam.

During the bombing campaign, 818 US airmen had died, with 918 aircraft having been shot down; many US airmen were taken prisoner.⁹⁴

For the entire war (21 years: 1954-1975), the Killed In Action (KIA), figures were:⁹⁵

Table 3

Force	KIA
US Forces	47,378(+766CIA + 10,824 Non-Combat) Of these
ARVN	22,3748
South Korea	4,407
Australia	469
Thailand	351
New Zealand	55
NVA/VC	1,100,000 (+ 4,000,000 civilians, in the North and South 12-13% of the entire population)

Of the total of around 12,000 helicopters which served in Vietnam, 5,607 were lost, with the loss of 2,165 pilots and 2,712 crew members.⁹⁶ It is estimated that over 40,000 helicopter pilots served during the war. The helicopter types included the Bell 204B/205, AH-1G/J, AH-47A, CH-21C, CH-37B/C, CH-3C/E, CH-46A/D, CH-47A/B/C, CH-53A/C/D, CH-54A, HH-1K, HH-3E, HH43-B/F, HH-53B/C/E, OH-13S, OH-23G, OH-58A, OH-6A, SH-34G, SH-3A, UH-1/1A/1B/1C/1D/1E/1F/1H/1L/1M/1N/1P, UH-19, UH-2A,UH-2B, UH-34D⁹⁷

94. Ibid., p. 132, The bombing campaign ended on October 31, 1968, before being recommenced in 1972 to aid in the US negotiating position in facilitating the withdrawal of US troops, pp. 161-162.

95. Ray's Web Server, 1st Battalion 69th Armour - A Tribute to my Brothers, Casualties-US vs NVA/VC, http://www.rjsmith.com/kia_tbl.html. Accessed on February 21, 2019.

96. Vietnam Pilots Helicopter Association, Helicopter Losses in Vietnam War: Updated 31 December 2018, <https://www.vhpa.org/heliloss.pdf>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

97. Ibid.

THE ASSESSMENT OF THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

The Cold War period was a time of serious power struggles between the Communist bloc and the Western powers.⁹⁸ Even the non-aligned nations had been drawn into battles of their own. The period between 1954 and 1975 also saw the three major wars involving India (1962-China 1965 and 1971-Pakistan). The rather simplistic view of the events in Vietnam along similar lines of the global struggle between Communist and non-Communist ideologies proved to be the decisive factor in Vietnam.

The case of the conflict in Vietnam was unique, and it was actually a continuum of a struggle under the leadership of its undisputed leader Ho Chi Minh since 1941, much before the Cold War. Even though the path chosen by Ho was based on the Communist ideology, he was prepared to be patient and was astute enough to take help from wherever possible, including other nationalist movements, with the aim remaining unwaveringly that of “freedom of the fatherland” and banishment of rulers not endemic to the region. No divisions between North and South were ever acceptable. This aim had pitted Ho Chi Minh against the French, the Japanese, the Chinese (KMT) and, finally, the Americans, and, along the way, he managed to obtain help from each of the forces, including the American OSS. Even though Ho Chi Minh died on September 2, 1969, without seeing his dream fulfilled, his death only fuelled prompt replacement of manpower losses (the Vietnamese joining in large numbers) faced by the struggle.

The path that was carefully chosen by Ho involved altering the cognitive behaviour of the entire populace. In 1941, at the start of the people’s struggle, with virtually no resources, he had stated:⁹⁹

We must rely on our own force, with some outside help. When our people absorb this beautiful idea of revolution, they will create the strongest of forces. Everything because of the people; everything for the people. People first, guns last. If we have people on our side, then we will have guns. If we have the people, we will have everything!

98. History, “Cuban Missile Crisis”, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cuban-missile-crisis>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

99. Currey, n. 1, p. 6.

The response by the French and thereafter by the US only helped to consolidate the people, aligning them against the “occupiers”. Serious mistakes on the part of Ho during the period 1955-57 (land reforms, resulting in the rampant killing of 100,000, eliciting a public apology from Ho Chi Minh) in the DRVN were not capitalised upon. Instead, the backing of a corrupt regime in South Vietnam which suppressed the Buddhists, a mercilessly persecuted opposition in the general populace, by the Americans, only resulted in the success of the propaganda programmes followed by the underground emissaries of Ho. The US too, did not learn from the French experience and adopted a methodology of imposing “prohibitive costs” through military action which only served to strengthen the cognitive aspects of the people’s resolve. This was fully exploited by the well-oiled machinery of the non-state actors supported by the DVRN.

TO SUM UP...

Considered in isolation from the geopolitics and in a purely military sense, the induction of helicopters into the Indochinese conundrum by the US had a similar effect to that of the induction of highly mobile units consisting of parachutists and armoured vehicles by the French in the first war of Indochina. The effect produced in both cases was to outmanoeuvre the guerrilla by becoming more mobile than him, thus, defeating him in the strict military parlance. In the pitched frontal battles, the NVA and the Viet Cong had limited chances of success due to the vast amount of firepower available with the US-led forces.

Hence, while Gen Westmoreland was not inaccurate in reporting to his president that “*the enemy can no longer succeed in the battlefield*”, owing largely to the assault operations by the helicopters; he, along with the rest of Americans, however, misread what actually constituted the battlefield.

Unlike in the Dien Bien Phu (1954) case, in which the French were routed due to grossly underestimating the capability of the enemy (coupled with allowing the Viet Minh under Giap having seduced them to choose the battlefield), in the case of the Tet Offensive (1968), which was again planned by Giap (and described later as a “Monkey Trap”), the offensive was eventually crushed due to the ready availability of firepower wielded by the helicopters.

The concept of imposing unacceptable costs on the enemy had failed as a concept since the cognitive aspects of the populace had been altered to such an extent that the price meant annihilation of the entire population. That is, the battlefield was actually in the cognitive domain rather than in the non-cognitive military domain which was being targeted for decades at the cost of minimal measures being undertaken in the non-cognitive domain.

Eventually, Saigon was renamed as Ho Chi Minh city, after the charismatic leader of the people's war, who did not live long enough to witness the reunification. Senior Gen Vo Nguyen Giap lived to a ripe old age of 102 before his demise on October 4, 2013. Both were perhaps content with the fact that their creation had sufficient steam and acumen to take on the might of the French, Japanese, Chinese and US in defence of their "fatherland". They had been successful in converting a thought in the cognitive domain into a militant action in the non-cognitive domain and the thought remained a dominant binding force despite overwhelming odds and adversity. But the statistics prove that the costs were very high, which they consistently failed to acknowledge. The victorious rarely do.

The helicopter, which had become the face of the Vietnam War, and, in a way, somewhat ironically contributed to prolonging the war, had also played an important role in limiting the number of allied casualties. During the desperate evacuation of the US Embassy in Saigon (Operation Frequent Wind) on the intervening night of April 29-30, 1975, the last helicopter, a CH-46D, crashed near the USS *Hancock*. The two pilots were killed but two crewmen survived due to a heroic night water landing rescue by a CH-43D, helicopter.¹⁰⁰ Helicopters had won the battle, but the war was lost.

100. USMC Combat Helicopter and Tilt Rotor Association, "KIA INCIDENT: 19750429 HMM-164 VIETNAM", <http://www.popasmoke.com/kia/conflicts/vietnam/incidents/19750429>. Accessed on February 23, 2019.