

A New Kind of War

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When Daniel Ellsberg was on trial for stealing the Pentagon Papers, his defense lawyers, to confuse the issue, introduced the claim that U.S. participation in the Vietnam conflict was premeditated, that the Tonkin Gulf incident was a contrived excuse for our intervention. I was one of the witnesses for the federal government. On cross-examination, Ellsberg's attorney, Leonard Weinglass, wanted me to admit that well before we went to Vietnam the Marines were preparing for combat there. I surprised him by confessing. Yes, I said, we were indeed preparing for the eventuality of having to fight in Vietnam. Even more important, I told him, we were preparing to fight in a lot of other places, too.

Unwittingly, Mr. Weinglass had underscored one of the characteristics that has distinguished the Corps-- a standing determination to be ready for combat wherever and however it may arise. Total readiness is, nevertheless, more an objective than a reality, because of the enemy--his strengths, his aims, and his resolve. We have learned, to our regret, that while you are certainly the better for preparing, the war you prepare for is rarely the war you get.

Thus, we come to an unusual, and generally unheralded, aspect of the Marines' quality as fighters. Adaptability, initiative, and improvisation are the true fabric of obedience, the ultimate in soldierly conduct, going further than sheer heroism to make the Marines what they are. "The battle is what it's all about," Marines say. "Try as hard as you can to be ready for it but be willing to adapt and improvise when it turns out to be a different battle than the one you expected, because adaptability is where victory will be found." This virtue of adaptability has found expression many times in the Marines' combat history, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1916, for example, Marines went to Santo Domingo on short notice with the simple mission of protecting the American Legation in Santo Domingo City. They were still there eight years later, involved in the far broader tasks of both pacifying and governing the country, to which they had adapted readily. In 1950, they went to Korea intending to make a decisive amphibious assault at Inchon to sever the North Korean supply line. Ten weeks later they were still in Korea, fighting quite a different kind of war-- a protracted land campaign in the subzero ice and snow of the Chosin Reservoir. And four years later they were still there, fighting an attritional war of position. They stood up to these varied combat challenges because of an instinctive determination to adapt.

The sternest fighting test of all, where the need for adaptability was greatest, came in Vietnam. The onset of that conflict found the Corps in an advanced state of training oriented primarily toward its traditional amphibious mission but with some attention given to counterinsurgency situations. Since 1962, when President Kennedy required all of the services to emphasize counterinsurgency training, the Marines had been preparing to operate in a counterinsurgency environment, not just in Southeast Asia but anywhere in the world.

Serving in the Joint Staff as the focal point in counterinsurgency operations and training, I went to Vietnam eight times between 1962 and 1964. In those early years, I learned something of the complex nature of the conflict there. The problem of seeking out and destroying guerrillas was easy enough to comprehend, but winning the loyalty of the people, why it was so important and how to do it, took longer to understand. Several meetings with Sir Robert Thompson, who contributed so much to the British victory over the guerrillas in Malaya, established a set of basic counterinsurgency principles in my mind. Thompson said, "The peoples' trust is primary. It will come hard because they are fearful and suspicious. Protection is the most important thing you can bring them. After that comes health. And, after that, many things--land, prosperity, education, and privacy to name a few." The more I was of the situation facing the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese Army, the more convinced I became--along with many other Americans, that our success in the counterinsurgency conflict would depend on a complete and intimate understanding by all ranks from top to bottom of the principles Thompson had articulated.

In 1964, I assumed command of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, embracing all the Marines in the Pacific Ocean area. Following the experience of Thompson and based on what I had learned in the preceding two years, we set about orienting our training toward combat in a counterinsurgency environment. The training culminated in early 1965 in a major series of exercises called Silver Lance, patterned as closely as possible upon the emerging situation in Vietnam. All counterinsurgency issues were explored: fighting both large and small bands of guerrillas; handling situations involving the local civilian population; supporting training and cooperating with the indigenous military; dealing with our own diplomatic representatives; and meeting the challenge of a privileged sanctuary, where a bordering, ostensibly neutral country is used as a base and a route of approach by the enemy. We added realism to the exercise by having Marines, carefully rehearsed for their roles, take the parts of friendly and hostile native forces as well as of our own political and diplomatic personnel. Everyone, from the high command to the individual Marines, was tested, and we all learned from the experience. The exercise could not have been more timely. About a third of the Silver Lance forces--the air/ground 1st. Marines Brigade--were at sea off the California coast when the decision was made to land at Danang. The brigade was turned westward immediately and directed to sail toward the anticipated battle. It was actually disembarked in Okinawa, but it ultimately ended up in Vietnam, as did all the other participants in the

exercise. And the 3d Battalion 9th Marines from Okinawa, the first unit to be committed, actually war-gamed a landing at Danang only two weeks before the landing took place.

So the Marines, from colonels to private, were mentally prepared and reasonably ready for a counterinsurgency conflict. However, it turned out that the mission of the initial force to land at Danang was greatly different from what they had been practicing. The unit was restricted to protecting the Danang air base from enemy incursion, nothing more. It was not permitted to "engage in day-to-day actions against the Vietcong," nor were the Marines allowed to leave the air base or to be involved directly with the local population--which is what counterinsurgency is all about. Soon the force was enlarged to include the whole of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade of five thousand men, but it remained confined to the airbase area, tied to what the senior U.S. command, "COMUSMACV" termed "protection of the Danang air base from enemy attack."

This was never going to work. We were not going to win any counterinsurgency battles sitting in foxholes around a runway, separated from the very people we wanted to protect. Furthermore, the air base was over-looked by hills to the west and northwest, giving the enemy a clear view of the field. On two sides, the airfield complex was cheek-by-jowl with the city of Danang, only a wire fence separating the base from two hundred thousand people--most of them suspicious of us, some of them hostile. Despite all this, General Nguyen Chan Thi, the Vietnamese commander of the area, termed the I Corps Tactical Zone agreed with General Westmoreland. He did not want the Marines moving outside the airfield area either. Thi, an intense, mercurial personality, had had no experience with Americans. He had, however, been involved with the French--not altogether favorably--and was determined, at the outset, not to allow the Americans to infringe his authority. Ultimately, Thi became totally confident in the Marines, willing to do just about anything they asked.

As Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, I was responsible for the training of all the Marines in the Pacific, for the equipment, their supply of Marine Corps items, and their readiness, but I had no authority whatever over their operational employment in Vietnam. That was General Westmoreland's business, and he answered to the commander of the Pacific Theater, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp.

Nevertheless, I felt strongly that American lives, as well as many valuable aircraft, were going to be hazarded if we could not patrol the hills around the Danang field. Furthermore, I believed that we could do little to help the people if we were obliged to shun them. I went, with Brigadier General Frederick Karch, the Marine brigade commander, to remonstrate with Thi. Thi listened. After we were finished, he just said, patiently, "You are not ready." We repeatedly pleaded with him, and he relented slightly. By 20 April, 1965, the Marines were patrolling the hills about two miles west of the airfield and the

countryside about four miles north of the field. I suspect, in both cases, that General Thi felt safe--there were few Vietcong in those areas but, as we were to learn, there were many not far distant.

These tiny moves into the hinterland turned out to be the first steps in a massive expansion responding to the siren calls of seeking more favorable terrain and engaging the enemy. The eight-square-mile enclave around the Danang airfield grew, in six months, to more than eight hundred square miles. Another enclave of some one hundred square miles was created fifty miles to the south at Chu Lai to accommodate construction of a second airstrip. A third enclave of some sixty square miles was established at Phu Bai, fifty miles north of Danang, at the direction of General Westmoreland, to protect a communications unit there. The creation and growth of the three enclaves brought a great opportunity to work among the native population, to seek out the Vietcong guerrillas in each area, and to bring a little stability to rich and populous areas, some of which had been under enemy control for a decade.

By mid-1965 the five thousand man force had grown to over eighteen thousand, and there was still a crying hunger for more Marines. This was so because the Marines' concept, from the start, involved fighting the Vietnam battle as a multipronged effort. They aimed to bring peace and security to the people in the highly populated coastal regions by conducting aggressive operations against the guerrillas and expanding the pacified areas as rapidly as they were totally secured. At the same time, they planned to train the local militia and to support the Vietnamese Armed Forces in their fight against the Vietcong. Finally, the Marines were determined to go after the larger organized units wherever they could be definitely located and fixed. They set about this balanced strategy with a will, showing persistence and no small degree of innovative genius.

The Marines' first experience of protecting the people began in May 1965. It was a challenging test of the lessons practiced earlier in the year in exercise Silver Lance. To secure the Danang air base from guerrilla attack from the northwest, it was necessary to cover the broad valley of the Cue De River. They learned quickly that Le My, a village of about seven hundred people, comprising eight hamlets, only six miles from the main airstrip, was truly enemy country. Two guerrilla platoons--about forty men--lived in the village where they had constructed an extensive cave and tunnel system. They moved in and out at will, extorting the people's rice and money, coercing their youth to join the insurgency, and threatening the village officials. Because of the Vietcong oppression, Le My was sick unto death. There was little government, little agriculture, little commerce, no security, no public services, and no schools. The Vietnamese Army and regional troops had made a few feeble passes at chasing the Vietcong away, but the enemy retained control of the area, its resources, and its people. Further complicating the situation was the fact that some of the active guerrillas had relatives in the village, from whom they received food, sanctuary, and information. Nevertheless, the people at large were dispondent and terrified. Even the village chief spent many of his nights in Danang because of his fear of assassination or capture.

In early May, after every patrol in the area reported receiving sniper fire, the Marines decided to clean the guerrillas out of Le My. They launched a two-company operation and found they had undertaken a time-consuming and enervating job. The Vietcong reacted to the American threat strongly--by fire, ambush, and booby trap, giving the Marines a foretaste of the bitter antiguerrilla war that was to absorb them for the next six years.

Eventually, however, the insurgents were rooted out of the caves and tunnels, and killed, captured, or driven away. The people's confidence was slowly restored by the security provided by the Marine units as well as by local militia, which resurfaced as the Marine influence grew. By ministering to the villagers' health, by supporting them in construction projects, and by helping them to dig wells and reestablish schools and markets, the Marines brought the villagers level of stability unseen in a decade. Concurrently, the Marines encouraged and assisted the local militia, training them, repairing their weapons, and helping them construct strong defensive positions around the village.

The Marines tried to put into effect in the village of Le My exactly what they had practiced before coming to Vietnam. Although lacking in the polish that comes with experience, the effort turned out to be classic--actually a good pattern for their subsequent actions, in scores of other villages, to deliver the people from terror. Among other things, it illustrated that the pacification process demanded the combined efforts of both Americans and Vietnamese. To this end, Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, the senior Marine commander, created a "Joint Coordinating Council," which included representatives from all organizations involved with the pacification process.

I learned a lasting lesson at Le My. In late May 1965, I went there with Lieutenant Colonel David A. Clement, whose battalion had done the entire Le My project. We met the district (county) chief and the village chief, who showed us with much pride and gratitude the rejuvenation of the village--the white-washed dispensary with two shy nurses wearing white; the one-room schoolhouse filled with serious-faced little children; the thriving marketplace, and, more seriously, the newly constructed outposts and security installations around the village perimeter. Neither of the two officials could speak English, but the district chief could speak French, and, amid all the smiles, bows, thanks, and congratulations, he said to me in a very sober way, "one thing. All of this has meaning only if you are going to stay. Are you going to stay?"

It was a hard question, but basic. The villager could not risk giving us their trust if we were going to go off and leave them unprotected in the vain belief that the Vietcong, once driven off, would not come back. They had already had the experience of being encouraged and then abandoned by the French, and

by their own Army, too. so I said, "These same Marines will not stay here, but others will never be far away, and your own militia will be here all the time." He made it clear that this was not exactly what he wanted to hear but it was better than nothing. It turned out to be good enough to encourage one hundred fifty people from two Vietcong-dominated hamlets some ten miles distant to leave their homes and their precious land and move to Le My just to be under the umbrella of American protection.

Le My had it ups and downs in the next five years--minor forays by guerrillas, assassination of one of its mayors--but the Vietcong never took over the area gain. Le My was a microcosm of the entire war at this period, reflecting on a small scale the perspective of ten million rural Vietnamese in fourteen thousand hamlets. They always feared, and sometimes hated, the Vietcong for the extortion, taxation, brutality, and designs on the local youth. They wanted and welcomed our protection but were terrified at the prospect of getting it and then losing it. The nearer were to them and the more thorough our efforts, the better the system worked. This painstaking, exhausting, and sometimes bloody process of bringing peace, prosperity, and health to a gradually expanding area came to be known as the "spreading ink blot" formula. In the effort to free and then protect the people, it should have been at the heart of the battle for freedom in Indochina. Many people applauded the idea, among them Army generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin. General Westmoreland told me, however, that while the ink blot idea seemed to be effective, we just didn't have time to do it that way. I suggested to him the we didn't have time to do it any other way; if we left the people to the enemy, glorious victories in the hinterland would be little more than blows in the air--and we would end up losing the war. But Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara expressed the same view as Westmoreland to me in the winter of 1965--"A good idea," he said about the ink blot formula, "but too slow." I had told him in a letter dated 11 November 1965, "In the highly populous areas the battle ground is in the peoples' minds. We have to separate the enemy from the people, and clean up the area a bit at a time."

With the tiny experience of Le My to encourage them, the Marines moved assertively into more Le Mys, as well as on to other combatant efforts aimed at breaking the guerrillas' hold on the people. One such endeavor was called "County Fair." It began as a simple U.S.--Vietnamese program for rooting out Vietcong military and political cells from the villages. Under cover of darkness a Marine unit would surround a village believed to be infiltrated by Vietcong. Then a Vietnamese Army unit would enter the village, search for tunnels and caves, and flush out any hiding guerrillas. Concurrently, they would screen the residents for identity cards and take into custody any suspicious persons.

The idea was sound in principle and sometimes effective in execution. But often it went aground on either of two circumstances. First, the Vietnamese Army was never enthusiastic about working among the people, and they were not particularly good at it. Second, the Marines were sometimes anxious to do too much for the same people.

some County Fairs were immensely complicated. While the Vietnamese Army troops were busy digging out guerrillas, there might be a Marine band concert in progress, a soup kitchen, a medical program, a dental program, a population census, some native entertainment, possibly a film, and even some political speeches--all going on at once. I never saw a County Fair where I did not wonder whether the villagers were absolutely sure of what we were doing. And I wondered how long it would take the Vietcong to percolate back after the Marines and Vietnamese Army had packed up and left.

A more effective project was called "combined Action," a scheme which brought together a squad of Marines and a platoon of the Vietnamese Popular Forces. The Popular Forces were at the very bottom of the pecking order in the Vietnamese military. They were recruited from and served in their own hamlet and, as soldiers, they were pitiable. Poorly equipped, poorly trained, poorly led, and given only half the pay of the Vietnamese Army, they fought indifferently, if at all, and were notorious for their desertion rate. They were literally afraid of the dark; they were quite unwilling to fight at night when the Vietcong were at large. It is not remarkable that they inspired little confidence among the villagers.

My first experience with the Popular Forces was on a trip I made to Vietnam in 1962 with Defense Secretary McNamara. In a hamlet outside the town of Nha Trang, we saw a Popular Force unit of about twenty-five thin, grave faced little men, drawn up as a sort of ceremonial honor guard. No two in the same uniform, armed with an assortment of battered rifles, carbines, and shotguns, they were monumentally unimpressive to look at. As we walked down the ragged front rank, McNamara pointed to one rifle and asked me, "Do you think those things will shoot?" I took one from a soldier, had trouble getting the bolt to open and, when I did, could not see daylight through the gun barrel. The ammunition in the youngster's belt was green with corrosion.

When I told McNamara, he said, "We are going to have to do something about this. These may well be the most important military people in Vietnam. They have something real to fight for--their own hamlet, their own family" And he was right. Unfortunately, little was done on their behalf between 1962 and 1965, when the Marines hit upon the possibilities inherent in combining the loyalty and local knowledge of the Popular forces with our own professional skill. It is hard to say just where the idea for Combined Action originated, but Captains Paul R. Ek and John J. Mullen, Jr., and Major Cullen C. Zimmerman are prominently mentioned as the architects and Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, the overall Marine commander, lent his energetic support.

A Marine squad composed of carefully screened volunteers who already had some combat experience was given basic instruction in Vietnamese culture and customs and then combined with a Popular Forces

platoon. The Marine squad leader--a sergeant of corporal--commanded the combined force in tactical operations, and the Popular Forces platoon leader was his operational assistant. The remaining Marines were distributed through the unit in subordinate leadership positions.

The initial effort, organized as a "Combined Action Company," involved four such units. In the summer of 1965, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, launched the program at Phu Bai. The combined platoons lived together in the hamlets. The Vietnamese taught the Marines the language, customs, and habits of the people and the local geography. The Marines conducted training in weapons and tactics. Together, they fought the Vietcong, gradually acquiring the respect and confidence of the villagers. Living conditions were humble--or less. One platoon I visited was living in two squalid native huts--dirt floor, no doors or windows, a blanket of files. At the moment the Marines and Vietnamese were busy cooking, sharing their food, and chattering in a mixture of English and Vietnamese. With much pride, they were anxious to tell me that only the night before they had conducted a successful ambush outside the village, killing one Vietcong and capturing another--a triumph, considering that only weeks before the Popular Forces troops could not be induced to go forth at night. Together the two components were effective in often bloody operations against the Vietcong, bringing a measure of peace to localities that had not known it for years.

The Combined Action program spread quickly to all three of the Marine enclaves. By early 1966, there were nineteen Combined Action units; by the end of 1967, there were seventy-nine. All were engaged in offensive operations against the Vietcong to protect their own home village. As they fought their little engagements they were reminding us of the wisdom of the ancient Chinese military scholar Sun Tzu, to which Mao Tze-tung adhered, who declared that in an insurgent war the revolutionaries are the fish and the people are the medium in which they swim. If the medium is hospitable, you are likely to win; if inhospitable you are sure to lose. North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap had his own way of saying it, "Protracted war requires a whole ideological struggle among the people. Without the people we have no information....They hid us, protect us, feed us and tend our wounded."

The Vietcong had enjoyed a free ride in the Vietnamese hamlets because of the general incompetence of the Popular Forces and the consequent uncertainty of the people. The Combined Action idea was an effective answer to the problem, helping to free the people to act, speak, and live without fear. It was a multiplier, where the final product had combatant value many times the sum of its individual components. There were hundreds of skirmishes and many casualties, but two extraordinary statistics reveal that the unique organization arrangement paid off: no village protected by a Combined Action unit was ever repossessed by the Vietcong; and 60 of the Marines serving the Combined Action units volunteered to stay on with their Marine and Vietnamese companions for an additional six months when they could have returned to the United States.

Senior Marine officers and those who had an interest in Marine Corps history knew that the Combined Action idea had been applied with success before--in Haiti (195-34), in Nicaragua (1926-33) and, probably most effectively, in Santo Domingo (1916-22). There the Marines organized, trained, and directed a new national police force, the Guardia Nacional, later to become the Policia Nacional. Formal training schools imbued the Policia rank and file with a sense of discipline. Under Marine leadership, the Policia exercised their new knowledge of weapons and tactics in hundreds of antiguerrilla patrols. But even more important, the Marines got to the heart of security in the Dominican villages by organizing, equipping, and training "home Guard" units composed of residents who were willing to defend their own homes and families. Led by a Marine officer and including ten to fifteen Dominicans and two or three Marine enlisted men, these mixed groups successfully brought a measure of peace to their small communities. In Vietnam, half a century later, similar combined formations again validated the concept, proving that their effectiveness far exceeded what might have been expected from their small numbers.

Even guerrillas have to eat, and the Vietcong had no fields of their own. They depended on the farmers for their sustenance, about 1 1/2 pounds of rice per man per day. At harvest time it was their habit to come down to the coastal plain and extort food from the people who had put in six hard months planting, cultivating, harvesting, and collecting the grain. The Vietcong extortion (called rice taxation) not only drove up the price of rice but, for many poor peasants, dangerously narrowed the margin between survival and starvation, a fact that did not seem to dissuade the guerrillas at all.

Beginning with the autumn rice crop of 1965, the Marines in the Danang and Chu Lai areas moved to free the peasants from the Vietcong rice tax collector. Using intelligence supplied by the villagers themselves, they launched attacks against Vietcong units massing to commence their rice-collecting operations. The Marines also deployed into the fields to protect the harvesters and then helped transport the rice to central storage areas.

The formula, called golden Fleece, was a success, assembling in the first harvest season some 870,000 pounds of rice for local use that in other years would have been vulnerable to Vietcong seizure. Put in other terms, the Marines' offensive actions disrupted Vietcong units and, in addition, kept sufficient rice out of the enemy's hands to supply and estimated thirty-five hundred guerrillas for an entire growing season. Subsistence, always a serious problem for the Vietcong, became a crisis.

Another step in winning the battle among the people was to prepare the individual Marine for the contacts he would have with the local residents as he moved about in the densely populated areas. We set about it in a methodical manner, developing a Unit Leader's Personal Response Handbook. The idea

began back in Exercise Silver Lance at Camp Pendleton in early 1965. Its principal architects were three chaplains--John Craven of my staff, Robert Mole, and Richard McGonigle. Craven persuaded me, in preparing for Silver Lance, that we would never be effective in counterinsurgency unless our troops had not only an understanding of but a respect for the local people, their habits, and customs. The idea grew slowly, as both commanders and troops had to be convinced of its importance. The Handbook took a practical, case-example approach, explaining to Marines the simple rights and wrongs of dealing with the shy and sensitive Vietnamese people. It became a standard weapon in our arsenal to deal with the complex problem.

(Skip Operation Starlite)

All together, the first Marines in Vietnam created an innovative strategy that was well attuned to the problems. It recognized that the people themselves were both the battlefield and the objective and that the usual tactical objectives--hills, bridges, rivers--meant little and the usual battlefield statistics--enemy killed and wounded--meant even less.

Between 1962 and 1968, I went to Vietnam fifty-four times for periods of five to twenty days. I saw a lot of the country, from the DMZ in the north to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south. And I saw a lot of the people, from French-speaking dilettantes in Saigon to Moslems at Phan Rang on the seacoast to Montagnards in the hills near the Laos border. As far back as 1963, I went on operations with the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese Marines and saw how easily sizable enemy forces could melt into a countryside willing to support, or at least to tolerate, them. Everything I saw kept bringing me back to the basic proposition that the war could only be won when the people were protected. If the people were for you, you would triumph in the end. If they were against you, the war would bleed you dry and you would be defeated.

Sound and logical as it appeared, the Marines' strategy had two defects: General Westmoreland did not agree with it; and it was unable to address the reality that the enemy enjoyed a privileged sanctuary in the ports of North Vietnam and in Laos, through which a growing cascade of deadly munitions was flowing.

