

Bill Laurie is not only a Vietnam Vet, but a Vietnam War historian as well (a true expert on Vietnam War, not the kind of "military pundits" who used to talk "bullshit" in some military programs on TV). His following writing has been presented at The Vietnam Center Conference (Texas, March 29. '06) on the the subject "ARVN: Reflections and Reassessments After 30 Years." Don't let the quotations, statistic tables, and references intimidate you, this ARVN report speaks outright simple and is worth reading.



ARVN: 1968 – 1975

by Bill Laurie



1 RVNAF, the Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces, underwent a significant change, both qualitatively and quantitatively, between 1968 and 1975. It was a change that went unnoticed by the news media and remains generally unknown to the American public, and is inadequately identified and described in many would-be "history" books, in part because the nature and extent of change could not readily be foreseen or predicted based on RVNAF performance and capabilities up to 1968. None of this is to deny serious problems existed, or that corruption and poor leadership did not continue to plague RVNAF's ability to defend the Republic of Viet Nam, yet to a degree these problems were being addressed and the positive aspects of RVNAF cannot be excluded from honest history.

I experienced this personally, arriving in Viet Nam in late 1971, serving one year with MACV, and returning for two more years, 1973-1975, with the Defense Attache Office. Originally scheduled and trained to serve as an advisor, I attended Infantry Officer Basic at Ft. Benning, Georgia; Combat Tactical Intelligence and Southeast Asia Orientation at Ft. Holabird, Maryland; and Viet Nameese Language School at Ft. Bliss, Texas. Upon arriving in Viet Nam I was told advisory slots were being phased out and instead I was assigned to MACV J-2 as an intelligence analyst, first covering Cambodia and then concentrating on Military Region IV, covering the entire Mekong Delta. This job expanded informally and encompassed liaison work with RVNAF staff, US advisory teams, GVN provinces, and RVNAF units in the Delta. During these three years I was, at one time or another, in 18 of the former RVN's 44 provinces, dealing with not only US and RVNAF elements but also with the Australians, USAID, and the CIA. I sat in on very high level briefings at MACV HQ as well as the RVN JGS, while the next week I might be in a Kien Phong rice paddy with PF troops, or flying across Dinh Tuong province in an ARVN Huey, or at Tra Cu Ranger Base along the Vam Co Dong River. Of great importance was the ability to speak Viet Nameese, and within one month after arriving in Viet Nam it was clearly apparent that nothing I'd heard in the US, either the "news reports" or rather silly debates on college campuses, described what I experienced and encountered. In sum, I asked myself "If all those people in the

2 U.S. are talking about Viet Nam, then where am I?" My off-duty hours were spent entirely within a Viet Nameese dimension of reality. Whether in Saigon, or Cao Lanh, or Rach Gia, I frequented the "quan nho," the card-table soup and coffee stands, eagerly listening to Viet Nameese people and troops, asking questions, and learning far, far more than I'd ever learned in the States, or even knew there was to be learned. My education did not end in 1975. Since then I have read cubic feet of declassified documents and hundreds of books (to include works in Viet Nameese),

interviewed scores upon scores of Southeast Asia- and US-born veterans of the war, and prowled the internet's hundreds of Viet Nam and Southeast Asia websites. There remains much, much more to Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand than is suspected by the American public, and conclusions presenting themselves do not conform to what most people think they know.

Yes, there were serious problems with corruption. Yes, there were examples of inept leadership. Still, no one told me, or even suggested, that my initial exposure to the ARVN 9th Infantry Division would reveal the professional and highly competent performance witnessed at a division FDC (Fire Direction Center for allocation of supporting artillery fire). Nor had anyone told me that the 7th ARVN Infantry Division, forever condemned by its lackluster performance at Ap Bac, years earlier, had evolved into a highly effective unit under the leadership of General Nguyen Khoa Nam, a man of impeccable integrity and tactical skills who remains unknown to the American public, while being justly revered by the Viet Nameese people. Nor did any suggest it would even be possible for Hau Nghia Province's RF forces, the provincial militia, to thoroughly humiliate not one but three NVA regular regiments during Hanoi's 1972 Offensive, systematically chewing up and spitting out attacking enemy forces that could have feasibly changed the course of history during this period.¹ The RF did not have the artillery and air support available to regular ARVN (to include Airborne and Rangers) and Marine units, and relied heavily on basic hard-ball infantry skills. Had the NVA broken through they would have posed an immediate and direct threat to Saigon, a mere 25 miles away, forcing ARVN 21st Division forces to pull back from QL 13, and thereby allow NVA forces to direct all their attention to An Loc. As has been noted by James H.

3 Willbanks⁽²⁾ in his excellent work, the 21st division, while not succeeding in breaking through to besieged An Loc, did force the NVA to divert a division away from An Loc, which conceivably might otherwise have fallen, with dire consequences.

In sum, RVNAF in its entirety, and often mistakenly referred to as simply "ARVN," was capable of far more than I had learned before going to Viet Nam, and far more than was conveyed to the American people. Then...and now. Going back to the period discussed in this presentation, it is acknowledged that RVNAF had serious problems. This is obvious. Were this not so, U.S., Australian, South Korean, Thai and New Zealand combat units would not have been required. Still, there were indications of what well-led, properly armed and equipped RVNAF forces were capable of. In 1966 the 37th ARVN Ranger battalion decimated an NVA regiment three times its size at Thach Tru, receiving a Presidential Unit Citation from Lyndon Johnson for its feat. An American advisor to the 37th, Capt. Bobby Jackson, described his counterpart, company commander Capt. Nguyen Van Chinh, as being "utterly fearless."³ The 2nd Marine, or Thuy Quan Luc Chien, Battalion, whose shoulder patch depicted a "Trau Dien," a "Crazy Buffalo," had likewise bullied VC and NVA units, demonstrating the appropriateness of their unit symbol (all the more meaningful for those who've encountered an enraged water buffalo). Their accomplishments were unreported in the US news media and are ignored in later day "histories."

By 1968, and in the aftermath of Hanoi's failed '68 strategic counter-offensive, it was clear to US decision makers that "Viet Namization" must be accelerated, which many people falsely assume is the demarcation between a period when RVNAF wasn't fighting, and now would begin to fight. This overlooks the fact that RVNAF monthly combat fatalities greatly exceeded those of combined allied forces for the entire war. RVNAF was finally supplied with modern weapons, replacing the WW II equipment most had been using (by early 1968 only 5% of RVNAF were using the M-16 rifle), generally inferior to VC/NVA weaponry. Concurrently, RVNAF strength increased the

board:

4 1968 1972

Regular Forces

Army 380,000 410,000 Plus 30,000/7.9%

Air Force 19,000 50,000 Plus 31,000/163%

Navy 19,000 42,000 Plus 23,000/110%

Marines 9,000 14,000 Plus 5,000/56%

Total Regular 427,000 516,000 Plus 89,000/21%

RF/PF Militia*

RF 220,000 284,000 Plus 64,000/29%

PF 173,000 248,000 Plus 75,000/43%

Total 393,000 532,000 Plus 139,000/35%

Overall Total 820,000 1,048,000 Plus 228,000/28%

(4)

*The term "militia" is often used yet may wrongly suggest the final evolution of these elements took the form of part-time irregulars. Sometimes referred to as "territorials," the RF (Regional Forces, or Dia Phuoc Quan) and PF (Popular Forces, or Nghia Quan) were full time military units, typically limited to their home province, or district, respectively.

As can be seen, "ARVN"-the Republic of Viet Nam ARMY, was only one component-56%-of the total armed forces. There were yet other elements, to include the National Field Force Police, People's Self Defense Force/Nhan Dan Tu Ve (PSDF), and Rural Development (RD) teams. While the latter were not considered full-time combat troops, and the PSDF often ridiculed, they were an impediment to the VC/NVA. In one case, not known to be documented, an RD cadre team turned back a VC battalion in Vinh Long province, its members skilled in calling in province artillery.⁵ While the PSDF were too young, too old, or too disabled to join the regular military, serving only as a village hamlet defense force against local VC tax, recruiting, or agitprop teams, they were another factor the local communists had to deal with, and one that had not been in place before 1968, when local VC could freely enter hamlets at night. Sometimes the PSDF were ineffectual, and sometimes they were propagandized into joining the VC (6), yet at other times:

5 *"...they (two VC) were trying to abduct a member of the PSDF when another PSDF appeared on the scene and shot both of them dead with an M-1. An AK-47 and 9mm Chicom pistol were captured."*

And... "Both Prey Vang and Tahou hamlets received small arms fire and B-40s tonight. The local PSDF managed to drive off two light ground probes."(7)

It was also an 18-year-old PSDF member who knocked out the first of many tanks destroyed at An Loc in the 1972 siege. (8)

Hanoi was not pleased:

"They [RVNAF] strengthened puppet [sic] forces, consolidated the puppet [sic] government, and established an outpost network and People's Self Defense Force organizations in many villages. They provided more technical equipment for, and increased mobility of, puppet [sic] forces, establishing blocking lines, and created a new defensive and oppressive system in densely

*populated areas. As a result, they caused many difficulties and inflicted losses on friendly [VC] forces."*⁹

This would not and could not have happened prior to 1968's creation and arming of PSDF with cast-off WWII weapons passed down from main force RVNAF elements. Likewise, the RF/PF, with assistance of US Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs), belatedly employed in 1968 (10), and armed with better weapons, began making progress, as witnessed in 1970 by MAT member David Donovan during a classic infantry assault:

*"We had just gotten past the major infestation of booby traps when we began to receive fire from a tree line in front of us. Water spouted up around us, bullets whined overhead, and we heard the stuttered popping of light small arms fire. The men reacted well now, not like the early days when getting any reaction from them under fire was next to impossible. Sergeant Abney took the rear of the column and swung around to the right, using it as a maneuver element while those of us in the front returned fire. When Abney's troops got to a good protected position they stopped and began firing themselves. Under the cover of their fire we moved ahead to yet another position. In this back-and-forth stepwise manner Abney's and my group finally got to the tree line and into the direct assault. Three men in the element I was with had been hit, I didn't know how badly, but everyone kept moving up. We had done well."*¹¹

6 Donovan's experience was not unique. Advisor John Cook recalled his optimism of 1970:

*"We [Cook and his Viet Nameese counterparts] were riding high, feeling almost indestructible. The morale and aggressiveness in the district was extremely high, causing us to pursue the enemy with almost reckless abandonment."*¹²

Performance of this caliber was not universal. There were units that did not respond to changing times and remained plagued by poor leadership, complete absence of aggressive patrolling and tactics, and instances in which American advisors may have been killed, or threatened by, RF/PF counterparts with whom they did not get along.¹³ Other American advisors did not encounter these unpleasanties but were unimpressed with their advisee charges. Still, accounts of favorable experiences and observations abound, yet are virtually absent from the national discussion and common American perceptions, or what is taught in our schools.

Improvement, or outright excellence, was not limited to the territorial forces, and ARVN infantry divisions—admittedly not all—demonstrated aggressive tactical brilliance. Quang Tri Pacification advisor Richard Stevens, who'd served a prior tour in the Marines, was amazed at the performance of ARVN 1st Division elements successfully attacking an NVA rocket launch site:

*"I was totally impressed and just dazzled actually, by the way they operated and by their daring in doings things. ... This was the thirteenth operation like this that this guy [a battalion XO] had led. You're talking about people that are total experts at what they're doing and who have done so many hair-raising things already and are still doing it. ... This regiment's advisors told me all the time I went there that...you're working with the best now. There's nothing we can tell these guys about anything. We're [the advisors] just fire support people. But as far as knowing how to operate, they're the ones that teach us.' We had both Australian and American advisors; they all said the same thing."*¹⁴

To the south, in MR IV's Dinh Tuong Province, the 7th ARVN division also performed flawlessly,

as testified by advisors and US "slick"pilots who flew 7th division troops on combat assaults. While the 7th, perhaps by virtue of the Ap Bac debacle of 1963, was termed by some a "search and avoid"unit, those working directly with the 7th have nothing but praise and admiration for the

7 7th's aggressiveness and tactical expertise. A former NVA infiltrator testified to the ARVN 7th's prowess:

"....the liberated zone was shrinking. ... I spent more and more time moving around, trying to stay away from ARVN operations. "In Ben Tre [AKA Kien Hoa Province] it was mainly the ARVN 7th division that was causing problems. Most of the division was recruited from the Delta so they knew the whole area. They were just as familiar with it as we were."15

Conditions became even worse as newly arrived NVA fillers to "VC"units did not know the area at all and were ill-equipped to wage the tree-line warfare of the northern delta. One POW indicated he was captured shortly after arriving when he and others were assigned to ambush a 7th division sweep the following day. In place before dawn, the would-be ambushers were hit from behind by 7th division flank elements ahead of the main body.16

The results of this became increasingly evident between 1968 and 1971, a period during which US troop strength was reduced by more than half, and decline in VC/NVA offensive operations was clear and distinct:

1968	1972	1968-1972	Change
US Forces	537,000	224,000	Down 312,000/58%
VC/NVA Bn Atks	126	2	Down 124/98%
Small Scale Atks	3,795	2,242	Down 1,553/41%
Terrorist Atks	32,362	22,700	Down 9,662/30%
Assassinations	5,389*	3,573	Down 1,816/34%
Abductions	8,759**	5,006	Down 2,573/43%
Percentage Secure	47	84	Up 37/56% Hamlets

Rice Growing Area	2,296	2,522	Up 226/9.8% (1,000 Hectares)
VN Civilians Admitted to Hospital For War-Related Injuries(% total Population)	88,149	39,402	Down 48,474/55%
VC/NVA Strength	250,300	197,700	Down 52,600/21%

8 *Excludes assassination victims at Hue

**Few abductees ever returned. They are assumed to have been killed.

The disparity of change between VC/NVA strength and offensive actions is illustrative:

Percentage Drop, 1968-1971

VC/NVA Bn. Sized Attacks 98%

Abductions 43%

Small Scale Attacks 41%

Assassinations 34%

Terrorism 30%

VC/NVA Strength 21%

The percentage decline in all forms of VC/NVA offensive operations declined more than did overall strength figures, indicating a decrease in overall military capabilities below that expected from a 21% troop strength drop. This occurred while American troop strength declined 58%. Not only were there fewer VC/NVA in country but they less capable of initiating offensive operations.

Little doubt exists that many Viet Nam statistics were of questionable veracity, and the HES rating (secure hamlets) in particular is frequently and justifiably damned for inaccuracies, yet the trend line is clear and there is no body of evidence, statistical or anecdotal, suggesting anything but a precipitous decline in VC/NVA fortunes between 1968 and 1971. While the VC, as distinct from the NVA, were not completely destroyed, and pockets of strong VC influence and control remained in such provinces as Chuong Thien, Dinh Tuong, Quang Nam and Quang Ngai, the indigenous VC were no longer a strategic force and had it not been for massive NVA infiltration and provision of modern weaponry, the war were have gradually expended itself. Even those VC units and areas that remained were entirely dependent on the NVA for their survival. "Anti-war" writer Frances FitzGerald, author of *Fire in the Lake* (ironically enough thoroughly lambasted by both Hanoi chief ideologue Nguyen Khac Vien and NLF/Hanoi supporter Ngo Vinh Long) acknowledged survival odds for both VC and RVNAF troops, in 1966 was 50-50, yet by 1969 VC survival odds plummeted to 10% while an RVNAF soldier had a 90% survival chance.¹⁸ Nguyen Van Thanh, after 23 years as a Viet Cong, defected in 1970, viewing the NLF cause as hopeless, citing improved RVNAF operations,

9 expansion of district PF and PSDF programs, and the GVN's impending land reform program as factors he could no longer deal with.¹⁹ Stanley Karnow states forthrightly in his profoundly over-rated book, without ever having explained how this all came about, that by 1971 "...the Viet Cong alone was no match for the Saigon government army."²⁰

Don Colin spent years in Viet Nam and was widely renowned for his gruff, excessively blunt rejection of anything he viewed as, and vociferously damned, as utter bullsh-t. He suffered through the frustrating difficulties, false-starts, and the very same problems viewed as constant unchanging universals, if not harbingers of doom. Yet by 1971 he saw the cumulative results materialize in the delta:

*"Thirty months ago the number of good leaders in MR IV could be measured on one hand. Even the corps commander, while he was a good, honest and fairly capable leader, was shy, unimaginative and not capable of stirring his subordinates to aggressive and positive activity. Division commanders were largely incompetent and most Province chiefs were largely incompetent and corrupt. Subordinate commanders not only mirrored but in most case magnified these faults. Now, the overall level of competence, honesty and dedication has risen to levels I would previously have thought unimaginable. ... This particular change has made me more sanguine regarding the ultimate ability of the Government to fully control Viet Nam and establish a stable government."*²¹

Then came Hanoi's 1972 offensive, a conventional blitzkrieg characterized by modern heavy weapons and introduction of such lethal devices as the SA-7 Grail anti-aircraft missile, the AT-3 wire-guided Sagger missile, and a veritable armada of T-54 tanks supported by several hundred 122mm and 130mm artillery pieces, superior to anything and everything in the US-supplied RVNAF artillery arsenal. RVNAF took some heavy hits; it appeared at times as if the end might be near and collapse imminent, yet RVNAF took a standing 8 count, recovered and blunted the heaviest offensive to date in Viet Nam. None other than America's preeminent VN scholar, Douglas Pike, declared Hanoi's invasion failed because "...the South Viet Nameese outfought the invaders from the North."²² Many commentators, to include Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, cite American air power as a decisive factor, and it was pivotal. Yet the implication that RVNAF would not or could not fight without US airpower omits

10 consideration of two key points. First, US troops would have expected, and been entitled to, the exact same air power that was used to support RVNAF. Secondly, and this point is seldom recognized: US airpower was a compensatory factor countering both superior NVA armor and, most significantly, superior artillery, the accurate 122mm and 130mm guns delivering massive destruction at ranges up to 19 miles. The US did not provide its ally, the Republic of Viet Nam, with as good an arsenal, especially in the realm of artillery, as the Soviets and Chinese Communist provided Hanoi. Hanoi had hundreds of 122mm and 130mm guns; RVNAF had no artillery sufficient to fire counter-battery, and had only two dozen or so 175mm guns, which are not as accurate as and have a lower cyclic rate of fire than 122s and 130s. Not even reinforced bunkers can withstand 130mm rounds with delayed fuses. Finally, again addressing the subject of airpower, RVN's own air force performed admirably during the 1972 battles, yet remain ignored by American commentators. An American FAC admired the VNAF A-37 pilots with whom he conducted an air strike against NVA positions:

"His dive took him down within range of automatic weapons and sure enough as I saw several lines of tracer ammo arcing toward Pepper lead, I shouted a warning. I saw him release his bombs at the very low altitude and score a perfect hit on the wall. In their succeeding passes, the VNAF pilots scored perfect hits each time and each time they were met by a hail of ground fire. ...ground fire [against the aircraft] was extremely intensive. The North Viet Nameese seemed to know their antagonists were South Viet Nameese."

*"I fully expected the A-37s to be shot down but both delivered all their ordnance unscathed. The two VNAF pilots put on quite a show and I admired their bravery if not their good sense."*²³

This was not an isolated incident, as attested by another American observer:

*"VNAF came into its own during the 1972 offensive. ... In the defense of Kontum the VNAF has been magnificent, absolutely magnificent."*²⁴

RVNAF took Hanoi's best shot in 1972, a shot far exceeding '68 Tet battles in terms of troop numbers and firepower. Roughly 150,000 NVA were believed to have been committed in the offensive's first phase, and another 50,000 deployed as the battles ensued. Tet '68 on the other hand, saw 84,000 VC/NVA committed, with limited artillery and armor (excepting MR I).

11 RVNAF continued to do reasonably well after the fraudulent Paris "Peace" Accords were signed and promptly violated. By late September 1973 an RVNAF task force had driven the 1st NVA division out its Seven Mountains redoubt and inflicted such heavy casualties that the 1st was disbanded, its surviving members parceled out to other units. A few months later the ARVN 7th division launched a major operation to drive NVA units out their Tri Phap base area in the Dinh Tuong-Kien Tuong-Kien Phong tri-border area, inflicting heavy casualties. Tri Phap had never been penetrated throughout the war and was characterized by hardened defensive positions; the defeat was so humiliating that communist authorities were cautioned to hide this defeat from their troops lest they become demoralized.²⁵ The Polish and Hungarian delegates to the impotent ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision (of the "cease fire")) doubled as spies for the Hanoi's communists. One of their 1973 reports stated no VC units (what few there were) were equal to RVNAF regulars, and even the NVA's best weren't comparable to RVNAF's Airborne or Marines.²⁶

By mid-1974 however US aid cutbacks began to slowly strangle RVNAF, and it would only get worse from thereon out. By 1975 the Available Supply Rates (ASR) for artillery rounds had plummeted to unacceptable low levels (per tube, per day):

1972 1975

105mm 180 10 Down 170/94%

155mm 150 5 Down 145/97%

175mm 30 3 Down 27/90% (27)

Everything was cut to the bone, and into the marrow. Some infantry troops were provided a basic load of 60 M-16 rounds, per week. Some units forbid troops from firing M-16s on full automatic. Infantry units in contact were sometimes limited to two artillery rounds on call unless being overrun. Lack of spare parts forced mothballing of tanks, river patrol boats, and aircraft. Worse yet, RVNAF troops and their families suffered under an economy shredded by 50% inflation and a 25% unemployment rate. A US DAO study conducted in 1974 revealed 82% of RVNAF did not receive enough food to meet family needs.²⁸ Hunger and malnutrition eroded morale and combat capabilities. The

12 situation worsened in following months, and was sickening to watch, a veritable death by a thousand cuts. A year later, when the GVN finally collapsed and, as can be inferred from reading would-be history books, many Americans were apparently surprised, wondering how everything could collapse overnight. The more intriguing question is how RVNAF fought on as long as it did after mid- 1974, with inadequate weapons, equipment, munitions, fuel, medical supplies, a constantly empty stomach, and an equally hungry family. Once the dam broke and the rout began following Thieu's order to pull out of the Highlands, chaos and panic took over, helped in part by confusing and changing orders emanating from the Presidential palace. As ignominious as the final collapse was, there were more than a few little "Alamos" as RVNAF defenders fought to the end. The 18th infantry division's stand at Xuan Loc was an epic battle, yet the 1st Airborne Brigade's presence and role in this very same battle is virtually unknown. While MR II was collapsing and the end appeared near, ARVN 7th division troops defeated an NVA attempt to cut QL 4, the sole highway connecting the Mekong Delta to Saigon. On the final day, the "ngay quoc han (day of national indignation)," an AC-119K gunship flown by Lt.s Thanh and Tran Van Hien circled Saigon providing fire support for the last units engaged. Out of fuel and munitions, they landed to refuel and re-arm and were told by their operations officer they need not take off again, all was lost. Lt.s Thanh and Hien stood firm, received their fuel and munitions and, accompanied by two A-1H Skyraiders piloted by a Major Truong Phung and a Captain Phuc, resumed their desperate battle. Only Capt. Phuc survived, strafing until he ran out of ammunition. Lt.s Thanh and Hien, along with Major Truong Phung, all met their deaths, shot down by SA-7 missiles. They fought to the very end.²⁹

Overall, no military, as starved as RVNAF was, could have withstood the NVA onslaught, as engorged as the NVA were with communist bloc artillery, armor, weapons, fuel, troop transport trucks, and munitions. As it was, even though RVNAF was gutted by aid cutbacks, it took everything the NVA had. Approximately 400,000 communist forces, almost 90% NVA, were required to defeat RVNAF. Hanoi had never before fielded a force as large and as modern as it did in 1975. It had never pulled all its units out of Laos and Cambodia.

13 Quantitatively, the 400,000 is just under 5 times the VC/NVA forces committed in Tet '68, yet qualitatively, enhanced by hundreds of long range artillery pieces, hundreds of tanks, thousands of trucks, and a complete arsenal of modern weaponry, the 1975 legions had more than 5 times the combat capability of Tet '68 forces. Examining matters from another perspective, it can be safely asserted that had the NVA been as enervated by supply cuts as was RVNAF, it could never have launched much less sustained its final offensive. Superior fire power proved decisive, hardly a

novel development in military history. By the end, RVNAF suffered a total of approximately 275,000 combat fatalities (excluding assassinations), from a country whose average population during the course of the war was about 17 million. Had the United States, with a population average of 200 million during the same time frame, sustained proportional fatalities, the death toll would have exceeded 3,200,000, necessitating another 56 "Walls" to record the names of the fallen. This did not go unnoticed by some observers. Sir Robert Thompson, while fully cognizant of RVNAF's shortcomings and growth pains, concluded:

"They [RVNAF and the GVN] surmounted national and personal crises which would have crushed most people and in spite of casualties which would have appalled and probably collapsed the United States, they could still maintain over one million men under arms after more than ten years of war. The United Kingdom did just that, proportionately, in 1917 after three year of war but never again. The United States has never done it (emphasis added)."30

Correspondent Peter Kann, far more enlightened than many of his journalistic colleagues, also weighed in, following Saigon's defeat:

"South Viet Nam did manage to resist for a great many years and not always with a great deal of American help. Few nations or societies that I can think of would have struggled so long."31

Did "Viet Namization" work? Had RVNAF matured and grown into a capable fighting force? It can be argued it did, only to be eviscerated by lethal aid cutbacks. A 1974 survey of U.S. generals who served in Viet Nam asked how well "Viet Namization" had succeeded. The answers:

1) ARVN is very acceptable fighting force 8%

14 2) ARVN is adequate and chances of their holding in the future are better than fifty-fifty 57%

3) Doubtful ARVN will make it against a firm 25% push in the future by VC/NVA

4) Other/No Answer 10% (32)

Thus, 65% of commanding generals gave RVNAF (in this case 'ARVN') a positive vote, yet these responses may have a built-in downward bias. It is not known how many of the U.S. generals served their tours in, say, 1966 or 1967, before RVNAF had embarked on its greatest improvement. It is not revealed just what role any of these officers served, with whom, and to what extent they were intimately familiar with RVNAF as a whole, the increasing effectiveness of RF/PF, etc. Nor was the question asked: "How would US troops have fared, in 1974-1975, under supply cutbacks suffered by RVNAF?" What can be said with certainty is that RVNAF, from 1968 on, accomplished far more than is generally known, that RVNAF units developed such proficiency that they were able to withstand and eventually defeat, NVA invaders in 1972, often, in the case of RF/PF, without massive artillery or tacair fire support. What also can be said with certainty is that American understanding of this is abysmally and disgustingly low.

Another very important factor that many commentators overlook and remain ignorant of was the younger generation of RVNAF officers and NCOs who were dedicated to the cause of a non-communist Viet Nam. They were open, candid, rational and honest, acknowledging, for example, that the Montagnards should not be treated as inferiors, that corruption need to be attacked, and that the a new Viet Nam need be forged, freed from shackles of the past. Many of these people were well-positioned to dodge the draft or secure a safe non-combat position; they did neither, and could be found in serving in high-risk combat positions, as volunteers. Their attitudes were articulated by one young RVNAF officer:

"...the people my age joined the military [RVNAF] because we had an ideal and we understood

what it was to live in a free world and to live in a Communist world. It was not like people said, that those who joined the military were just conscripted into the service and didn't have any

*15 ideas of their own. But the Americans never seemed to understand that."*³³ Tran Quoc Buu was chairman of RVN's Labor Confederation, equivalent to America's AFL-CIO. He had influence and could have arranged for his son to find safe duty, much safer than his position as an ARVN infantry officer. In the closing weeks of RVN's existence, while pounded with NVA artillery and desperately short of munitions, Buu's son wrote him a letter:

*"You must explain to them [Americans] the gravity of our situation. ... They have to provide the military and technical aid they had promised. I beg you Father, to intervene with them. Otherwise, we will be crushed and defeated. We are not cowards. We have no fear to die. ... In any event, I will hold my position and not withdraw."*³⁴

Tran Quoc Buu's son was killed in action. Dr. Phan Quang Dan was minister of refugee resettlement, a former opponent of Ngo Dinh Diem, and known for his honesty. He had the power and influence to keep his son, Phan Quang Tuan, out of harm's way. Neither accepted this option and Tuan volunteered to fly A-1E Skyraiders, used solely and expressed for close tactical air support. After killing 7 NVA tanks along the DMZ during Hanoi's '72 offensive, Captain Tuan was shot down and killed by NVA anti-aircraft fire.³⁵ These individuals were not unique. This author routinely encountered young gunship pilots, rangers, marines, airborne, all volunteers for hazardous combat duty, and all of whom were repulsed by the idea of a communist Viet Nam, and the continuation of business-as-usual corruption emanating from Saigon. One of the more poignant examples of dedication to the nationalist cause occurred when cadet officers from RVN's Da Lat military academy prepared to make their last stand, as witnessed by French correspondent Raoul Coutard who encountered them moving out to block advancing NVA units:

"'You are going to be killed?'

'Yes,' answered a warrant officer.

'Why? It is finished.'

*'Because we don't want communism.' And, bravely, these young cadets in their beautiful new uniforms, their well-polished shoes, went to get themselves killed."*³⁶

16 The Truong Thieu Sinh Quan, in Vung Tau, was a boarding school and military academy for Viet Nameese youth whose fathers died in the war. When the end came, the 12- and 13-year boys sent the smaller children home, barricaded the school, and engaged advancing NVA units:

*"They kept fighting after everyone else surrendered! ... Many of them were killed. And when the Communists came in the cadets fought them. The Communists could not get into that academy."*³⁷

People of caliber were rising in RVNAF's ranks, and exigencies of the situation forced greater reliance on promotion based on ability, not political reliability or family connections.

The American news media failed, utterly and pathetically, in Viet Nam, far, far more than the military forces, RVN, US and allied, they frequently condemned with smug and presumptuous inferences. A survey of 9,604 broadcasts by NBC, CBS and ABC, from 1963 to 1977, clearly showed the inadequacies of television reporting(sic). 67 (0.7% of total) dealt with RVNAF training. 79 (0.8%) with Pacification. 256 (2.7%) with either RVN or Cambodia government or military. A total of 392 broadcasts, comprising 2.7% of all television news coverage of Viet

Nam.38 There was nothing about the more than 200,000 VC/NVA hoi chanh vien(defectors), nothing about RVNAF forces that fought well. Nothing about the famed "Kingbees," RVN helicopter pilots who saved lives of US Special Forces elements under fire along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Most if not all Americans recall the dramatic photo of the Chinese man who stood before a tank in Tiananmen Square yet no one knows of RVN Marine Sergeant Huynh Van Luom who stood on the Dong Ha Bridge and stopped an NVA tank column, firing his LAW anti-tank missile:

*"The spectacle of this 95-pound Marine lying in the direct path of a 40- tank, which had no intention of stopping, was in one respect incredibly mad. In another, more important respect, it was incredibly inspiring to a pathetically thin defensive force and to many refugees, few of whom had ever witnessed such an act of defiance and bravery. ...The extraordinary bravery of this one South Viet Nameese Marine had caused an armored attack, which until that moment had been almost certain of success, to lose its momentum."*39

17 In a telling instance of news media myopia, reporter Donald Kirk exhibited absolutely no interest in visiting the ARVN 7th division, where, under the leadership of Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam, the 7th had become an extremely effective unit, whose members appreciated the division farm Gen. Nam established to alleviate economic hardships of his troops. Yet when Kirk and other reporters were detained at an NVA road block, and later set free, Kirk was upset that he didn't have the chance to talk with the NVA:

*"I kept thinking how much they looked like they were right out of the movies. ... They seemed to be like regular guys, you know. I only wish we could have stayed and talked to them longer."*40

Mr. Kirk can rest assured that 7th division troops were "regular guys," well worth talking to, and learning from. He, like the much of the news media, was not interested and there is little mystery as to why most Americans who served in Southeast Asia view the news media with bitter contempt.

Had the news media made any attempt to connect with the Viet Nameese people and troops they would have found, as I did time and time again, that they viewed Hanoi's communism with contempt and disgust, as a betrayal of Viet Nam's culture and values. They were not fighting, and dying, to protect the "corrupt Thieu regime" but to secure a better life for their people, their children, and their country. In an extreme expression of this view, one Viet Nameese Marine enlisted man told me that after they'd finished with the NVA they were going to turn their guns on Saigon corruption. The dismal and tragic events that followed after 1975 verify the logic and validity of their commitment. The entertainment media and American education have done no better and remained content to repeat if not embellish media-established mythology. A widely used high school history textbook's Viet Nam chapter has no mention of RVNAF to speak of, saying only that "Viet Namization failed," and otherwise incorporating over 200 demonstrably false or grossly misleading statements in just over 13 pages of text. There is mention of the Cambodian Incursion, yet no indication that more RVNAF troops were involved-29,000-than the 19,300 US troops committed, or that RVNAF had previously conducted spoiling raids

18 against NVA positions in the Cambodia. RVNAF, as will be the topic of another presentation here, was "invisible." Movies and television are, some historical documentaries notwithstanding, even worse. Even the film "Bat 21," purporting to depict the rescue of LTC Iceal Hambleton in 1972, inexplicably leaves out the fact that an RVN SEAL, Nguyen Van Kiet, conducted the rescue with US SEAL Tom Norris, earning a US Navy Cross for his valor and heroism. How can the

American public expect to learn anything when de facto censorship erases any and all indications of exemplary RVNAF performance?

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that RVNAF was saddled with one serious burden that proved impossible to overcome: an amazingly inept and disturbingly ignorant ally in the form of the U.S. government. An entire seminar could be given on this subject – and should be. Pseudo-strategies emanating from Washington were, in essence, criminally negligent. Nothing was ever done to block and hold the Ho Chi Minh Trail, without which Hanoi's war could never have been prosecuted. Nothing was ever done to engage in the propaganda/counter-propaganda information war, which was, in the form of *dich van*, a *sine qua non* for Hanoi's strategy, and one that was conducted with diabolical deceitful brilliance. Nothing was done, until late in the game in May 1967 when CORDS was set up, to plan and intelligently coordinate military and pacification operations. Nothing was done to develop a theater-wide coalition among Viet Nameese, Laotians, Cambodians and Thais against a common enemy, while Hanoi did just that, building an Indochina Theater command structure to integrate all factors into a coherent regional strategy. America's excuse for leadership was "mu loa", blind, and fumbled like a hog on ice, like a "coc vang," a golden toad, very wealthy but very dumb. Counter-historical propositions can seldom be proven with complete certainty, and perhaps the war was "unwinnable." Maybe. Yet those Americans and Australians who served alongside their RVNAF comrades, "chien huu, ban be, giong nhu anh em ruot," carry with them the profound sadness of having lost the venture, of having lost scores of dedicated friends, and also the great honor of having tried to attain a better world for the common people of Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. They were not driven by sophisticated

19 concerns over world geo-politics, but rather by respect and admiration for the many Southeast Asians who valued their country, who "the bao ve giang son que huong." Much history remains unexplored, reflecting a continuation of the American propensity to see only through American eyes, filtered by American pre-conceptions. Some books refer to Viet Nam as an "American ordeal," never once asking what type of ordeal the Southeast Asians experienced. An abundance of valuable historical information and astute observations, without which full comprehension is impossible, is found in books written by Viet Nameese (and Laotians). Works by **Ly Tong Ba, Ha Mai Viet, Pham Huan, Phan Nhat Nam, Tran Van Nhut** and others cry out for translation, as do the dozens of articles published in Viet Nameese military journals and publications each year, many of them describing battles, developments, and personalities that are completely unknown to American historians. Failure to consult these sources ensures that Viet Nam, and Hanoi's Indochina war, will both remain indecipherable enigmas, and that RVNAF's real history will remain buried under layers upon layers of myth, ignorance, and unfounded conjecture.



1. Stuart Herrington's *Silence Was A Weapon* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), later re-published as *Stalking the Viet Cong*, remains the sole narrative of Hau Nghia RF 1972 battles.
2. James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 140-141.
3. Personal interview with author, December 1993.
4. Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Viet Nameese Army* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), p. 151.
5. The author saw the report on this event, which occurred in Vinh Long Province, sometime in early 1975. It is not known if the report still exists or even made it out of Viet Nam.
6. See Herrington, *Silence Was A Weapon* for commentary on abduction and proselyting of PSDF.

7. Frank Brown, *Delta Advisor* (Bennington, VT: Merriam Press, 1990), (both incidents) p. 12.
8. General Lam Quang Thi, *Autopsy-The Death of South Viet Nam* (Phoenix, AZ: Sphinx Press, 1986), pp. 49-50.
9. Dr. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), pp. 274-275.
10. No known comprehensive study of MATs has been conducted. There were approximately 350 of these small teams deployed after 1968, primarily assisting RF and PF units. This topic needs and deserves research.
11. David Donovan, *Once A Warrior King* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), pp. 151-152.
12. John Cook, *The Advisor* (Philadelphia, PA: Dorrance & Company, 1973), p. 167. Reprint: (NY, Bantam Books, 1987), p. 181.
13. One former advisor told the author he was and is sure his fellow advisor was shot by bad elements of the troops he advised. Another told the author he was directly threatened by his counterpart and was reassigned to another province. This was not a common occurrence.
14. Howard C.H. Feng, *The Road to Ben Hai*, master's thesis, University of Hawaii, 1987, pp. 108-109. 20
15. David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Portrait of the Enemy* (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 74-75) p. 185.
16. Author read this POW's interrogation report, which included description of circumstances of capture.
17. American forces in Viet Nam: Michael Clodfelter, *Viet Nam in Military Statistics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 1995), p. 253; VC/NVA battalion-sized attacks and small scale attacks: Clodfelter, p. 151; terrorist attacks: Philip Davidson, *Viet Nam At War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 633; percentage of secure hamlets: Gunter Lewy, *America In Viet Nam* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 192; Viet Nameese civilian hospital admissions: Lewy, p. 443; assassinations and abductions: Lewy, p. 454; rice planting area: Nguyen Anh Tuan, *Viet Nam-Trial and Experience* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1987), p. 399. [[Note: Clodfelter's excellent work is badly mis-titled. While it does have abundant statistics it also contains a great deal of narrative history, regarding both Viet Nam adjoining countries of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand. Highly recommended.]]]]
18. Cited in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why-The American involvement in Viet Nam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 159.
19. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 270.
20. Stanley Karnow, *Viet Nam, A History[sic]* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 595. Author of this paper is willing, at any time, to discuss how and why Karnow's work is, and there's no other way to put it, sloppy, shoddy history.
21. Mark Moyar, *Birds of Prey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), p. 180. The author knew Colin personally; he was caustically honest and candid and was not reluctant to verbally demolish fatuous statements.
22. Douglas Pike, *Viet Nam and the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), p. 93.
23. Norbert Simon, "The Nails-FACs in Viet Nam," *Military*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, September 2002, p. 12.
24. Sorley, *A Better War*, p. 338
25. Col. William E LeGro, *From Ceasefire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981). Seven Mountains: pp. 66-67. Tri Phap: 89-91. Captured document read by author in Viet Nam, 1974. No known copies exist.
26. Oliver Todd, *Cruel April* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 438.
27. Thi, *Autopsy-The Death of South Viet Nam*, p. 7.
28. Anthony B. Lawson, Director of Special Studies, US Defense Attache Office, Saigon, RVN: *Survey of the Economic Situation of RVNAF Personnel(Phase III)*. Tab B, unnumbered 8th page, Question A15.
29. <http://www.vnaf.net/>
30. Sir Robert Thompson, *Peace Is Not At Hand* (New York: David McKay, 1974), p. 58.
31. Cited in Anthony Buscaren, editor, *All Quiet on the Eastern Front* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin- Adair Company, 1977), p. 122.
32. Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977), p.153.
33. Compendium of Viet Nam news broadcasts, by subject matter, prepared by Professor Lawrence Lichty, submitted to The Viet Nam Project, WGBH Television, Boston. Author photocopy undated.
34. Larry Engelmenn, *Tears Before The Rain-An Oral History of the Fall of South Viet Nam* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 233.
35. Thi, *Autopsy-The Death of South Viet Nam*, pp. 17-20.
36. Ray Fontaine, *The Dawn of a Free Viet Nam* (Brownsville, TX: Panamerican Business Services, 1992), pp. 100-105.
37. Raoul Coutard, "L'Adieu Saigon," (Date/publication unk.) cited in Phan Vinh Kim, *Viet Nam-A Comprehensive History* (Solana CA : PM Enterprises, 1992), p. 520. 38. Engelmenn, *Tear Before the Rain*, p. 256.
39. Col. G. H. Turley, USMC, Ret. *The Easter Offensive* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), pp. 134-135.
40. Sam Anson, *War News* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1989), p. 85. The author met Kirk in Viet Nam and strongly suggested he write a story on the ARVN 7th and its accomplishments, elaborating on Gen. Nam's integrity, tactical brilliance, and dedication to a free Viet Nam. Kirk received this with all the enthusiasm of someone hearing a phone solicitation for 21aluminum siding. He asked no questions and simply walked away. Other advisors experienced the same disdain, asking reporters to come and see how well their counterparts were doing, only to be shunned with blank stares of utter indifference.