



***Black Ops Vietnam: The Operational History of MACVSOG***

**By Robert N. Gillespie**

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Reviewed by Chris Timmers

U.S. foreign policy in the Far East took a fairly strong beating in the late 1940s with the “loss” of China (Mainland China). The beaten back threat of Communist guerillas in the Philippines was also fresh on the minds of State and Defense Department planners in the early 1950s.

Creeping Communism was in further evidence as the French were booted out of Vietnam in 1954. The U.S. was committed to blunting this advancement as it moved, in varying degrees. Vietnam could not be abandoned to the unrestricted advance of Communism; new democratic states in Southeast Asia would be threatened by the fall of Vietnam, so the U.S. had only one choice: Oppose this Communistic/totalitarian advance by all means possible. Remember that the French retreat had entailed only the removal of French forces up to the 17th parallel and the removal of all French troops in the northern part of the country, Laos, and Cambodia; the part of Vietnam south of that border (“South” Vietnam) was not included in the Paris Peace treaty of 1954. But that distinction was no problem for the Communists in North Vietnam; they began a campaign of infiltration and guerilla warfare almost immediately before the ink had dried upon the document.

So what did the U.S. do given this reality? In January 1964 it formed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG). MACVSOG is now known, if it is known at all, as a covert, Special Operations outfit which contained elements of the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and South Vietnamese defense forces.

But from the start the whole program was beset with problems. To begin with, senior Army officers (who, after all, really ran things) were not supportive of the effort. Gillespie includes remarks by Army Chief of Staff GEN Harold Johnson who referred to Green Beret soldiers as “fugitives from responsibility.” Furthermore, GEN William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, was highly skeptical of unconventional forces. He was a straight-laced West Pointer who had grown up through the ranks of airborne Infantry and was a conventional Soldier all the way. Other problems would soon manifest themselves: Vietnamese members of infiltration teams would often “turn” and

betray their South Vietnamese allies. Additionally, finding officers and NCOs with experience in unconventional warfare proved to be more difficult than thought.

Given all the challenges MACVSOG faced, particularly the highly ambitious mission it was given and the lack of support from the highest echelons in the U.S. Army, is it any wonder that the organization never produced any tangible, successful, and lasting results? That a force of just over

10,000 combat effectives would be expected to fight and win in three countries (North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) and inflict damages and casualties designed to discourage North Vietnam's designs is, in retrospect, fanciful. Ten thousand troops isn't even a full division. The U.S. had the equivalent of six full divisions in South Vietnam alone, and we know the difficulties they had.

The story of MACVSOG is told professionally and with the right amount of passion. I can say that, as a former Infantryman, I would have liked a greater read on the pilots (U.S., Taiwanese, South Vietnamese) who flew missions deep into enemy territory. They are some of the many unsung heroes of this conflict.

But my problem with this book is in one of its conclusions. Gillespie writes, "It was the supreme irony that the United States, with its revolutionary origins and the sacrifices made by both sides during its own Civil War... which failed to comprehend the dedication of the Vietnamese people to the creation of a unified state. So bound up was the United States in the Cold War ideology... that it failed to see its own values, determination, or history reflected in those of the enemy." Excuse me? "The dedication of the Vietnamese people to the creation of a unified state?" It was not the dedication of any peoples to the unified state of Vietnam but the dedication of a Communist cadre to impose state totalitarianism over the southern section of Vietnam. Our revolution was against the British and sought to expel totalitarianism; the Communist North Vietnam sought to install it. Our revolutionary heroes had absolutely nothing in common with the soldiers who marched in step with of the Vietcong, Viet Minh, or NVA. If our revolutionary heroes are not different from the "heroes" who united Vietnam, how does one explain the thousands of boat people who were the result of North Vietnam's victory? No, our failures in Vietnam were many, but not appreciating the zeal of the Vietnamese to "unite" their country is not among them.