

MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND VIETNAM (MACV) OBSERVATIONS FOR THE MITT

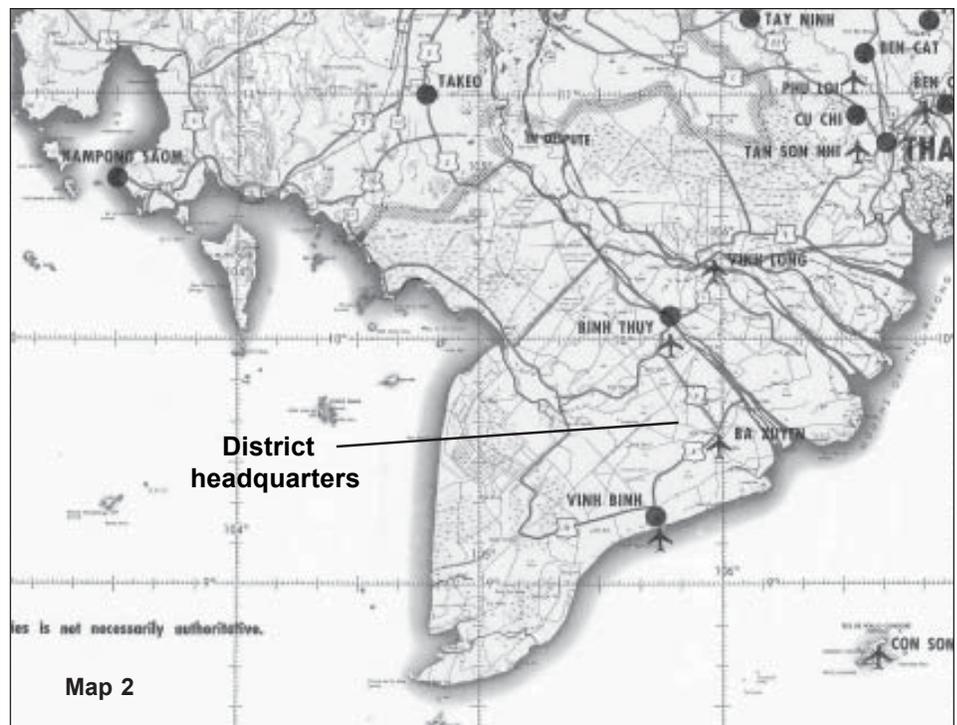
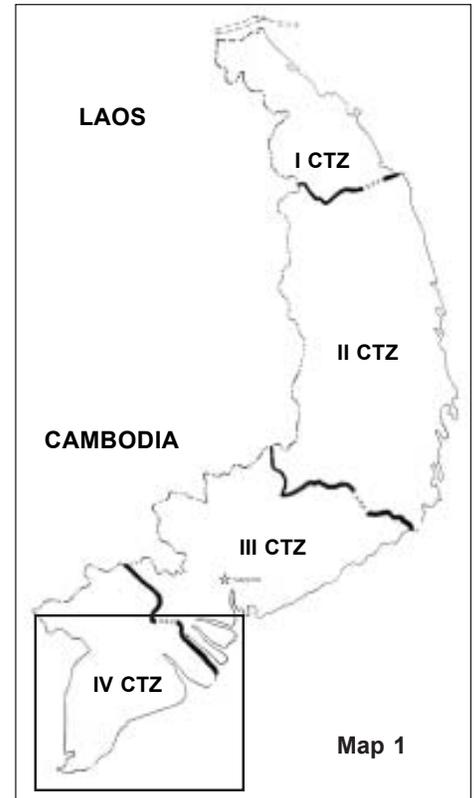
RUSSELL A. ENO

The 1968 Tet offensive by Vietnamese communist forces began January 30 and 31 in the two northernmost corps tactical zones (CTZ) (Map 1) and quickly spread south, eventually giving rise to combat — much of it in towns and cities — throughout the country. The communists' Supreme Command had intended the offensive to be a coordinated surprise attack across the length of Vietnam, but failed to realize that North Vietnam had established a date one day earlier for the start of the lunar new year than the date for South Vietnam, and hence their commanders commenced operations a day apart. The attacks began in the northern CTZs on the 30th and a day later in the south. The delay meant that the hoped-for element of complete surprise was lost, and as a result South Vietnamese, American, and allied units in country had at least some advance warning of the offensive. Despite early gains by the enemy, by June 1968 — the month I reported for duty — the Tet offensive had stalled and the stubborn resistance of South Vietnamese Army units and their allies was turning the tide. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong (VC) killed in action (KIA) and wounded in action (WIA) exceeded 200,000 by the end of the year, with an unknown but presumably far greater number of wounded. U.S. casualties for 1968 amounted to approximately 14,600 KIA and 87,400 WIA, while South Vietnamese losses were around 29,000 KIA and 172,500 WIA.

The Republic of Vietnam units opposing the communists included those of the Vietnamese regular army (ARVN), regional force (RF) civil guard companies, and popular force (PF) self defense platoons. Americans colloquially referred to the latter two paramilitary organizations as RF/PFs, or *rough puffs*. While regular army units were centrally organized, trained, and controlled, RF rifle companies — numbering around 100 soldiers commanded by a first lieutenant or captain

— were recruited and organized within a province, were part of a provincial battalion, and operated within that province at the direction of the province chief, who was usually a Vietnamese colonel.

I was assigned as the assistant district advisor to Thuan Hoa district, Ba Xuyen province, IV CTZ (Map 2). The district headquarters village that housed the six members of Advisory Team 73 was the home base to the 566th and 567th RF companies. The popular force platoons were locally recruited volunteers responsible for village and hamlet security, were the least trained and equipped of the three army echelons, and numbered from 25-35 soldiers. By the fall of 1968 most ARVN infantry units were armed with M-16 rifles, while RF companies carried World War II and Korean War vintage weapons. My two RF companies' heaviest weapons were their .30 caliber Browning Model 1919A4 air-cooled machine guns and M-29 81mm mortars, which were used mainly for defense of the district headquarters and



were seldom carried on operations. Platoons counted on their .30 caliber Model 1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifles and M-19 60mm mortars for firepower. The rank and file of the companies used either .30 caliber M1 Garand rifles or M1 carbines and a mix of .45 caliber M1A1 Thompson, .45 caliber M3, and .45 caliber submachine guns, and M1911A1 pistols. The PF self defense platoons were armed mostly with .30 caliber M1 and M2 carbines. There were, however, some exceptions: the district chief's bodyguard squad carried AK-47 Kalashnikovs because of their lower recoil and 30-round magazine capacity, something that struck me as odd since the chief rarely went on operations, preferring instead to coordinate operations from his quarters. We had three different district chiefs during my one-year tour. Since we captured large quantities of Chinese-made ammunition from the VC, resupply for the Kalashnikovs was never a problem.

The Vietcong likewise had three echelons, somewhat analogous to the structure of ARVN infantry forces. The best equipped and trained were referred to as main force VC units and operated at up to battalion level under direction of the southern communist leadership. As time passed, VC in our district were augmented by veterans/survivors of the Tet offensive. These had some assault rifles and got more as the war progressed, but also had many of the same weapons as our RF soldiers. Since they had U.S. World War II vintage rifles, their ammunition resupply was a problem which got progressively worse as time went on, until enough Kalashnikovs and ammunition became available to give them first firepower parity, and later superiority, over RF units. By January of 1969 they were better armed, with Kalashnikov assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, RPG-2 and RPG-7 rocket propelled grenades, and 82mm mortars.

The next lower echelon consisted of the full-time guerillas in company-sized units who operated at the direction of province communist leaders. The lowest priority among the VC were the squads and platoons operating at village level, whose main weapon in our district was the Model 98 Mauser bolt-action rifle carried by German infantry in World War II. At the end of the war, the Soviet Union had captured vast numbers of Mausers and commensurate amounts of ammunition, which they exported to communist insurgencies around the world during the Cold War. The 7.92 x 57mm Mauser — usually referred to as the 8mm Mauser — fired a heavier bullet at a greater muzzle velocity than the .30/06 M1 Garand, and was a weapon to be reckoned with in the broad, flat expanses of the Mekong Delta where they could deliver reliably accurate fire — albeit at a slow rate — out to 400 yards and beyond. I was surprised to see that the ammunition the VC were using bore pre-World War II German head stamps. That 30-year-old small arms ammo was the standard Berdan-primed stuff with the corrosive primers in use throughout the war, and was utterly reliable. Although these sporadic aimed shots



Courtesy photos

An advisory detachment returns from an operation in July 1968. The Vietnamese RTO has an AN/PRC-77 FM radio with the short flexible steel antenna. Note that both advisors are carrying M-72 LAWs in addition to their individual weapons.

were sometimes attributed to snipers, we never found any indications that true snipers were being employed against us at district level. A single VC sitting alone under a bush, firing an occasional shot at advisors far away across rice paddies, is not necessarily a sniper.

Advisory Team 73 usually participated in two operations per week, most lasting a day, with occasional overnight ambush patrols targeting VC tax collectors and infrastructure, or to cordon off a hamlet for a pre-dawn raid. Because of the knee-deep mud prevalent in the Mekong delta we traveled light (see photo), carrying an M-16 with six magazines or an M-79 grenade launcher with 20 rounds, two canteens, steel pot, wound dressings, and at least one M-72 light antitank weapon (LAW) per man. A Vietnamese radio/telephone operator (RTO) carried our AN/PRC-25 (later the AN/PRC-77) FM tactical radio with four different colored smoke grenades attached to the back with heavy rubber bands. The RF company commander selected the RTOs and made sure they understood that they were to stick with the advisor no matter what. And they did. Tough, courageous and confident, they were always there when I needed that radio. Oddly, the only weapon I ever saw an RTO carry was the .45 pistol.

With this brief outline of the war as of June 1968 and the friendly and enemy force structure and weaponry in Thuan Hoa district, I now want to offer insights into the role, challenges, and limitations faced by an infantry advisor during that time. Some of these are still as relevant to members of today's military transition teams as they were to me four decades ago, and reflect T.E. Lawrence's advice based on his experience with Arab warriors during the First World War.

Saving Face — Theirs, Not Yours

This can make or break your relationship with your counterpart or with those you are trying to train. We possess skills that they may not, we have access to things they cannot get, and they know it and do not need to be reminded of these advantages. The trick is to assist the host nation chain of command in such a way that you strengthen their authority without appearing condescending or in charge. Nowhere is saving face more important than in Asia, and instructors stressed this in the Military Assistance Training Advisor Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, prior to deployment. My counterpart, Trung-Uy (1LT) Hiep had been leading troops in combat while I was still in high school and college, and had his tactics down pretty well. He would, however, accept suggestions when we were one-on-one and then gather his platoon leaders and NCOs and present them as his own. One-on-one I also learned a great deal from him, and we built a good working relationship within my first two months in country.

Support Your Counterpart

Command is not an elected office, and your counterpart will not always have the total support of those he commands. If you support him and defer to him when it comes to running the unit, you will earn his respect and that of his subordinates. At first I had junior officers asking me to intercede with the company commander on everything from leave requests, to the order of march for the next day's operation, to close air support. Stay above unit politics; if you carry every complaint to the commander, you'll

be just another whiner and he'll tune you out. You only get one silver bullet; use it wisely. You will, however, hear and observe things that worry you and you will have to weigh them carefully, prioritize them, and be very careful about what you carry to him. Remember, approach him only with those matters that you are concerned about. Do not forget that it is better to have him do something 80 percent right than for you to force a zero defects standard on him. Sure, you may be able to achieve the latter by applying pressure through your and his chains of command, but the price of your success will be the loss of his support and your own credibility. His men will know something different has happened; they will soon figure out what you're up to and rally to him — a fellow countryman — leaving you the odd man out.

They're Watching You

As one of a half-dozen Americans in our entire district, I soon became acutely aware that we were objects of curiosity. Being more open and less uninhibited, children sought to touch us, our uniforms, our weapons, our vehicles, and our equipment. Even without knowing much — if any — English, they would sit around and listen to us talk simply because we were new in town and represented a diversion. Older youth and adults would tend to hang back and watch us, but for the first six months we were pretty much in the spotlight. They knew our every move. Our interpreter kept us informed as to what was being said about us in the market place, and this gave us a pretty fair idea of the locals' attitudes toward the advisors. One point: never, ever assume that

no one understands what you are saying. Months or years of hard work can be swept away and relationships soured because of a careless remark by an advisor *or a member of his team*. The locals will know if you're the team chief and assume that your team members' words reflect your own feelings. This is one case in which every member of the team must know and support to the ground rules, whether he agrees with them or not. In Thuan Hoa district we had to replace a key member of our team because of a comment made in the team house about the courage of one of our rifle company commanders, and which was overheard by one of the district chief's bodyguards. The bodyguard was probably the last guy we'd expect to understand English, but the damage was done nevertheless. Remember, a person's passive language



Thuan Hoa district headquarters toward the end of the rainy season, at the intersection of the Cá Châm Canal (1) and the Ò Quên Canal (2). These are tidal canals linked to the South China Sea. Also shown are the building (3) housing the district chief's office and Advisory Team 73, the locations of the 566 (4) and 567 (5) Regional Force companies, the village schoolhouse (6), two 105mm howitzer firing positions (7, 8), the adjacent marketplace (9), and the drop zone where aerial resupply of artillery ammunition was delivered (10). This shot was taken facing southwest. Elevation is 3 feet above sea level.

proficiency is always greater than his active language skills; simply put, you can always understand more than you can actually say. If you take a person with marginal language skills and let him hear a comment, there's also a good chance that when he passes it on the translation will also be totally different from what was actually said.

They Know the Enemy

When I was advising in a counterinsurgency that had been running for the better part of two decades, I was dealing with counterparts who knew — and were known by — the local Vietcong. They were enemies, but — given the intermarriage and social bonds within the village — most villagers had grown up together and later gone separate ways. A number of the older villagers had fought with the Vietminh against the French, and their sons had followed the same political ideology. We had pretty good intelligence about who had sons with the VC and who was in turn feeding them intelligence on our activities. I learned to be a good listener, and you should do the same. Everyone has a story to tell, and there's good information in the chaff if you take the time to sift through it. This will mean spending a lot of time with your interpreter, and that raises another point: be patient with him. If he's in the middle of a translation, let him do his job. Don't be constantly interrupting with: "What's he saying? What's he saying?" because the local he's talking to may not have gotten to the point yet and the interpreter is waiting for that.

Set Reasonable Goals for Yourself

When I got off the Huey helicopter at district, I knew I was the latest in a line of district advisors and that more would come after me. I soon realized that if I was to make a difference it would be by completing my predecessor's unfinished projects while planning and executing short-term, attainable goals that I could accomplish without dumping them on the guy who would follow me. I inherited an IR-8 rice project that was intended to introduce what was hailed as the Wonder Rice. Developed in the Philippines, IR-8 yielded twice the harvest of the standard rice grown in Asia, and Vietnamese acceptance of this new rice program was slow. We finally got a farmer to rent us part of a rice field, plow it and

work the soil into the right consistency (mud), and plant the thousands of little rice shoots.

My tour ended before the harvest, but my successor was there when a bumper crop came in that astonished the locals. The Vietnamese government won some hearts and minds that year, and U.S. advisors took private satisfaction at having facilitated the project. An advisor should neither seek nor expect recognition for his efforts except from his own chain of command; we were there to support the efforts of the government of the Republic of Vietnam and when we were through we went away, as you and your own military transition team will do. We tackled other projects ranging from well drilling to hamlet medical aid projects and educational expansion when we were not on combat operations, and succeeded in bettering the lives of thousands of Vietnamese.

Listen to Your Predecessor, Train Your Successor

One of the most important contributions we made to the MACV effort was the continuity we ensured by learning from our predecessors and in turn training our successors, and that was built upon honesty. The guy you are replacing needs to tell you about not only his success stories but also his failures. He will wish he had done some things differently, and so will you. The key is to avoid the more egregious mistakes and pitfalls that he has already found. You owe it to yourself and your successor to show him the same openness and straight talk that helped you. Tell him what unfinished work you are leaving and why it is important. Introduce him to your interpreter and later make him aware of the interpreter's strengths and weaknesses. You're not betraying anyone in doing this; you're simply letting him know how strong an asset he has.

Keep the Enemy Guessing

The local Vietcong had eyes and ears everywhere in the district. In addition to the fortified district headquarters, we had a dozen outposts scattered across the delta and these were tempting targets for the occasional main force VC battalion looking for a victory. The Vietcong would study their selected target meticulously, plotting the size and extent of the barbed wire and concertina barriers; fields of fire; size,

number, and location of bunkers; access and egress routes; reaction times for gunships and fixed wing aircraft out of Soc Trang Army Airfield; minefields (if any) and the size and weapons of the platoon that usually manned an outpost. They would then plan the attack at a sand table, work out options, and finally rehearse a full-scale attack somewhere where they could not be detected. Any change in the layout of the position — rebuilding bunkers, modifications to the wire defenses, mine laying, registration of artillery and mortars — would likely cause them to scrap the attack and begin planning anew based upon the new intelligence. The VC, while brave and determined to achieve their ends, were not fools. They did not want to be caught halfway through the concertina on a moonless night when an AC-130 gunship showed up and started dropping flares prior to their gun run, as had happened at one outpost and cost them the better part of two battalions. Almost invariably the outposts they chose to attack had become sloppy, static, and predictable, and as a consequence were pounced upon. As long as we were unpredictable and varied our techniques, they were off balance because it reduced their likelihood of success.

Our enemies in the global war on terror are no less vigilant. They have learned from the Vietnam War because we and others have written so much about it; they are voracious consumers of anything that will teach them how we fight or how to fight us. As our military transition teams continue to develop and reinforce the skills of our allies, we can learn a great deal from what we have done before in another nation faced with an insurgency. If we build upon that base of experience we increase the likelihood that we can more effectively reach those we train, and ultimately prepare them to assume responsibility for establishing and sustaining a stable society free from fear of aggression.

Russell A. Eno is currently serving as the editor of *Infantry Magazine*. As an infantry lieutenant, he served as an advisor to the 566 and 567 Regional Force Rifle Companies in the Mekong Delta, Ba Xuyen Province. He is a 1967 graduate of the University of New Hampshire ROTC program. He retired from active duty in 1991 and has been editor of *Infantry* since 1992.
