

The Following article is from a prepared document that the Federations Researcher, Mr Graham Walker, used during talks to students studying the Vietnam War for the NSW HSC Syllabus, during the late 1990's. The subjects covered reflect on the nature of the war, and aspects of the type of warfare and the role of the Viet Cong. The article is still relative to today's studies, and recommended reading for anyone wanting an insight into Australia's role in the Vietnam War 1962 to 1975.

The Nature of the War

The war I, (Graham Walker), am talking about is that which was fought in Vietnam from the early 60s until its end in 1975. It is that part of the 30 years of conflict in Indo-China which we call the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refer to as the American war.

Perhaps I should first set the scene. The French war in Vietnam ended in a peace agreement in 1954. This agreement divided the country into North Vietnam under the government of Ho Chi Minh, and South Vietnam under the government of No Dinh Diem. There were to be elections held within a few years of the peace agreement to unify the country under one government.

By the late 1950's no election had been held and armed conflict broke out in South Vietnam between the supporters of Ho Chi Minh and the supporters of No Dinh Diem. The supporters of Ho Chi Minh formed the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam known as the Viet Cong.

The Viet Cong did not have to develop from nothing. It inherited much of the organization methods and personnel of Viet Minh, which had so effectively fought the armies of France.

No Dinh Diem's government of South Vietnam was supported in this conflict by the United States of America and some of its allies (including Australia), whilst the Viet Cong received support from Russia, China, some eastern European countries, and, of course Ho Chi Minh's government of North Vietnam.

In 1965, in response to the war going badly for the government of South Vietnam, combat troops of the United States and her allies (including Australia) entered the war. At the same time, troops from the combat forces of North Vietnam entered South Vietnam to support the Viet Cong.

There were important differences between the forces of the opposing sides. Even before US combat troops entered the war, the forces of the South Vietnamese government had much greater firepower and mobility at their disposal than their opponents and command of the air. After 1965 when United States combat forces entered the war this advantage in firepower and mobility increased dramatically.

The other important difference between the opposing forces was that they represented different political ideologies. That is, there were two different political ideologies competing inside the one country for dominance.

These differences led to the Viet Cong adopting certain military and political tactics and strategies; i.e. adopting a certain type of warfare. It was known as Revolutionary Guerrilla warfare.

Let's leave aside the "revolutionary" aspects of this type of warfare for now and look at the 'guerrilla' aspects.

Guerrilla warfare is a way of fighting an enemy who is superior in firepower and mobility. Even before the United States committed its large military force to the fight in 1965, the United States equipped, trained, advised and supported military forces of the government of South Vietnam

were far superior to the Viet Cong forces in firepower and mobility. But when the United States military forces arrived, the difference became even greater.

The United States air-force ruled the skies over South Vietnam. Indeed it was unchallenged. And from those unchallenged heights the United States air-force could direct at the Viet Cong more conventional (non nuclear) high explosives than had been possible in any previous war. There were B52 bombers which could drop scores of 1000lb and 500lb bombs from 50,000ft with amazing accuracy. The explosion of each 1000lb bomb on hitting the ground dug a crater the size of your lounge room. There were fighter aircraft which could deliver only a few 500 or 1000lb bombs but with even greater accuracy, and which could also deliver an array of rockets and canon fire as well as canisters of flaming napalm.

There were C3 transport aircraft fitted with a number of machine guns with very high rates of fire and loaded with an enormous amount of ammunition which could circle a designated area for hours, saturating it with small arms fire. There were special helicopters fitted with rockets and machine guns. Then there was the artillery. There were thousands and thousands of artillery pieces firing in support of the forces of the South Vietnamese government and the forces of the United States and her allies. There were 16 inch guns sometimes available from ships of the United States and Australian navies lying off shore. On land there were 8 inch guns, then an enormous number of 155mm medium artillery and 105mm field artillery as well as countless 80mm and 60mm mortars. Then there were the tanks which usually sported the equivalent of a field gun.

And all these guns could be continually fired because wherever they were, they could be re-supplied by road convoys protected by armored vehicles or, if necessary, they could be supplied by helicopter.

One of the classic successful uses of this massive firepower was at the Battle of Khe Sanh. This battle took place in the north western corner of South Vietnam, lasting from January to April 1968. In that battle 6000 US marines were besieged by 20,000 troops of the North Vietnamese army. In breaking the siege, 100,000 tons of munitions was dropped and fired by the Americans.

In comparison, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese troops had very little firepower at their disposal. With the US air-force in complete command of the skies, the use of convoys of trucks to transport artillery and to resupply them inside South Vietnam was very difficult. Such large scale resupply was restricted to the border areas of the north and west. Inside South Vietnam most of the ordinance resupply was done on foot.

The United States and South Vietnamese forces not only had a firepower advantage, they also had a great advantage in mobility. Indeed with their thousands of trucks, armored personnel carriers, amphibious vehicles and helicopters, the United States and Vietnamese forces may have been the most mobile army in history. The ability to use all these means of transport relatively freely resulted primarily from the absolute command of the skies held by the United States air-force. It was just this command of the skies by the United States air-force which condemned the Viet Cong to much more restricted mobility; more often than not, a mobility, as we have already noted, largely restricted to walking.

But the point about 1000lb bombs, napalm, artillery shells and other ordinance of mass destruction is that to be destructive there must be a mass to destroy. That is, for all that American firepower to be effective there had to be targets such as large concentrations of troops, defended installations, vehicle convoys, concentrations of equipment and defended positions.

Now it is the main aim of the tactics of Guerrilla warfare to avoid presenting such targets. Troops fighting a Guerrilla war do not hold ground. That is, there is no piece of ground they consider it necessary to defend to the last man. When Guerrilla soldiers are challenged on a piece

of ground, they fight with a view to an orderly withdrawal from it and occupying another. Neither do Guerrilla troops congregate for long in large concentrations; rather they disperse in small groups and live in environments like jungles where finding them is difficult. When they want to execute a military action such as an attack, they secretly concentrate near the objective, carry out the attack, then, before reinforcements can arrive, and before their enemy's firepower can be brought to bear on them, they withdraw and disperse into the jungle. Guerrillas often find that nighttime military operations make them less vulnerable to their opponent's superior firepower and mobility.

Guerrillas know too that if they are close to an enemy during an action, their enemy's use of his firepower is limited, because, of course, shells and bombs do not distinguish between friend and foe.

All these factors lead Guerrilla forces to favor the use of the ambush. Troops can secretly concentrate at the ambush position, spring their ambush close to their enemy so as to make the use of the enemy's firepower difficult, then, having inflicted damage, quickly disperse into hiding. A classic tactic of guerrillas is to launch an attack on a defended outpost knowing that a relief column will be sent, then ambushing the relief column; perhaps all this happening at night with the troops dispersing before first light.

The Viet Cong and North Vietnams adhered closely to these Guerrilla tactics. They tried to choose the time and place for a battle and avoid battle at other times.

This type of warfare in South Vietnam meant that there were no front lines as there were in the 1st World War, the 2nd World War and Korea. Front lines only develop to protect ground. So, because ground is not important to the Guerrilla, no front lines are formed. As there are no front lines, there are also no safe rear areas. An ambush might be sprung anywhere.

There is a limitation to Guerilla warfare. Whilst these tactics can deny the enemy the use of his firepower they also prohibit the Guerrilla from winning the war. This is because to win, the Guerrilla must concentrate his forces to overcome his enemy's defended centers of power.

This fact is understood by Guerrilla armies which consider Guerilla tactics, not as the final solution, but as a way to wear down their enemy both physically and psychologically whilst remaining intact themselves. There will come a time Guerilla armies believe when they either become strong enough to concentrate and face their enemy or when their enemy's resolve, particularly a foreign enemy, will be so worn down that it will give up or leave. They realize that neither of these objectives may be realized quickly and therefore develop a philosophy of patience.

The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces had another problem, the solution to which they had to solve quickly. With the command of the air and superior firepower enjoyed by their armies, resupply was difficult. That which originated in Russia, China and Europe was channeled through North Vietnam and had to enter South Vietnam either across the border between North and South Vietnam, come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail which ran just inside the Cambodian border with South Vietnam, or come by ship down the eastern coast of North and South Vietnam. All these supply lines were tenuous, being subject to ferocious interdiction. So there had to be other lines of supply. And this is where the story of the 'Revolutionary' aspect of the Revolutionary Guerrilla warfare begins.

The opposing military forces represented not only a view of who should head the government of South Vietnam but also represented different ideologies or political systems. In the villages of South Vietnam there were those who preferred the Viet Cong's ideology; those who thought they would be better off under the Viet Cong's political system. These people were organized by cadres from the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (the Viet Cong) into groups. There were farmers groups, young peoples groups, women's groups and so on. This

organization was known as the Viet Cong Infrastructure or VCI and its business was usually, by necessity, clandestine.

The task of the Viet Cong Infrastructure was to provide logistic support and intelligence to the Viet Cong military forces. Logistic support included food, money clothing and recruits, whilst Infrastructure members who worked in local headquarters of the South Vietnamese military forces might provide intelligence about troop movements and operational intentions. And because the other lines of supply were so tenuous, the support of Viet Cong Infrastructure for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military units was essential for their survival.

But this dependence did not extend only one way. Without the knowledge that the Viet Cong military units were fighting with some success, it would have been very difficult for Viet Cong cadre to convince villagers to commit themselves and join their organizations.

The Viet Cong military units and the Viet Cong Infrastructure were, then, interdependent, each needing the other for survival. And for that survival there had to be contact between the two; a line of communication.

This line of communication usually ran first from the Viet Cong Infrastructure in the village to the local guerrilla unit. This was a small military unit of perhaps 10 or 20 soldiers, enlisted exclusively from residents of that village, which was usually stationed fairly close by. From the local guerrilla unit the line of communications then ran to the Viet Cong Local Force battalion. This was usually a well trained and equipped battalion of say 500 soldiers enlisted from within the Province in which it operated. It would be usually found further away from the villages, perhaps split into sub units which moved locations fairly often.

From the local force battalion the line of communication then ran to the Viet Cong Main Force battalion or regiment and North Vietnamese battalions or regiments (regiments being larger formations than battalions). These formations were usually more heavily equipped than the local force battalion and their range of operations greater. They would usually be stationed still further from the populated areas. (Now I should like to include a word of warning into my narrative. What I am giving you here is a model. It is a model which had, in practice, a multitude of variations to suit local conditions, but it does, nevertheless, demonstrate the principles involved).

So that was the type of warfare prosecuted by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military forces with the necessary support of the Viet Cong Infrastructure.

Before passing on to discuss how the Australian military forces fought this enemy of Revolutionary Guerrillas, it is important to mention that although the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops lacked the great weight of firepower able to be administered by their enemy, the arms and equipment they did have, was generally very good. Their basic weapons were the Russian designed Kalashnikov or AK47 rifle which may even have been superior to those used by the United States and Australian forces. Another basic weapon was the RPG2 & 7, light anti-tank rockets which were also very effective against infantry. Then there was an array of machine guns, mines, mortars and ground to ground rockets, all of which were modern and effective.

Well, what was the Australian response?

Since 1962 Australian army advisers had been working with South Vietnamese army units and some Australian Air Force transport aircraft had been operating in support. But in 1965 the Australian government decided to send an infantry battalion to take part in the fighting. This battalion fought with an American brigade north of Saigon for twelve months. At the end of that twelve months Australia was given the responsibility for the whole of Phuoc Tuy Province north east of Saigon and a task force of two then three battalions with armor, artillery, engineer helicopters and logistics units to support them, established itself there. The strength of the Australian force reached about 8,000.

The government of South Vietnam had never had a strong grip on Phuoc Tuy Province. Neither had the French before them. So the influence of the Viet Minh had been strong, a legacy bequeathed by the Viet Cong. The pattern of Revolutionary Guerrilla warfare in Phuoc Tuy Province was therefore long established and deep.

The commanders of the Australian military force in Phuoc Tuy Province recognized two fundamental tasks. The first was to search out and destroy the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese military units operating in the Province. The second was to cut the vital link between the Viet Cong Infrastructure in the villages and those military units.

The cutting of that vital link, the commanders realized, would hurt the military units out in the jungle. But it would, in time, also hurt the prestige and credibility of the Viet Cong infrastructure and allow the agencies of the South Vietnamese government, unhindered, to win the hearts and minds of the village people.

The Australian commanders saw their forces as a shield, behind which the agencies of the South Vietnamese government could safely wage their political war against the alternative being offered by the Viet Cong, causing the Viet Cong Infrastructure to lose support.

So what type of warfare did the Australian forces prosecute in their efforts to destroy the Viet Cong military units and cut the line of communications between those units and the villages?

I'll first describe an operation designed to seek out and destroy a Viet Cong unit out in the jungle of Phuoc Tuy Province, an operation of the Australian Task Force as shield.

Intelligence is received that there is a possible concentration of enemy in a thickly jungled area in the north west of the province. This intelligence might have come from an aircraft sighting, but is more likely to be from an intercept of a Viet Cong radio message by special direction finding radio receivers or by a satellite.

One of the three battalions is given an area of operations by the Australian Task Force commander and told to seek out and destroy the enemy there.

But the area of operations is well out of the range of artillery based at the Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat. So one of the battalions four rifle companies is taken by helicopter to an area well within that 10,000 metro range of the area of operations where it secures ground for a Fire Support Base. Guns are then flown into the Fire Support Base from Nui Dat by Chinook heavy lift helicopter.

Once the guns are in place and are ready to fire into the area of operations, each of the battalion's other three rifle companies (each having an effective strength of something less than 100 men) is taken by helicopter to a landing zone a day or more's walk from that area of operations. The companies are not taken by helicopter into the area of operations itself so as to reduce the risk of alerting the Viet Cong to the Australian presence. Each man carries seven days rations and no helicopter resupply will be needed until those rations run out, unless there is a fight with the Viet Cong before then. The companies then walk for that day or more, enter the area of operations and begin searching the area given them by the battalion commanding officer. The companies do not follow tracks but rather traverse the jungle on a compass bearing, their position being constantly plotted on maps by the commanders.

One of the companies cuts across a track running through the jungle. Inspection of the track and the foliage abutting the track shows that a group of about fifteen has recently walked this way. Intimate knowledge of the networks of tracks through the jungle is the Viet Cong's means of navigation; generally they do not use maps and compasses. So they are vulnerable to ambush by the Australians. A reconnaissance of the area is carried out and other tracks are found. The

company commander decides to ambush these tracks in the hope they will be used again by the enemy before the company needs a ration resupply in five days time.

Another of the companies, a long way away from this first, is following a creek line in the hope of finding tracks leading down to the water in use by the Viet Cong. As they are carefully pushing their way through the jungle adjacent to the creek they run into the enemy party coming the other way. A fire fight ensues. Artillery fire is brought down behind the enemy party in contact in case there are more enemy following, but cannot be brought down on the enemy in contact because of their closeness to the Australian troops. The forward platoon commander of the company prepares to attack the enemy group but before he can mount the attack the enemy withdraws. There were probably some enemy killed and wounded, but they are carried away by the retreating Viet Cong. Blood trails lead off into the jungle.

The third rifle company is moving along a low ridge line which follows the line of another creek. The forward scout fails to notice a number of tree stumps with mud rubbed into their cut surfaces to camouflage them. The trees have been cut to construct the roofs of bunkers which are dug in a defensive circle then themselves carefully camouflaged. There are hundreds of these bunker systems in the thick jungle areas and Viet Cong units move from one system to another. The roofs of the bunkers are just above ground level so as to allow a firing aperture at ground level and are made of tree trunks and packed earth so as to resist artillery shells.

The forward scout misses the mud caked tree stumps and presses forward. He senses something wrong- a sound? - a smell? - something awry in the arrangement of the foliage? The second scout is moving up closer behind him. Then the forward scout sees it. It is the low bump in the ground that is the roof of a bunker. He knows that if the bunker system is occupied he is dead.

He starts to gesticulate to the second scout just as the Viet Cong open up from the bunkers. He is killed immediately and the second scout is hit as he dives for cover. The forward section does an automatic contact drill with the section machine gun moving forward and opening fire while the six or seven riflemen close up behind the section commander ready for his orders. But the section commander hears a Viet Cong machine gun firing as well as Viet Cong rifles. He hears an RPG anti-tank projectile explode on hitting a nearby tree. He knows that this enemy is too big for his section. The platoon commander comes forward and decides to leave this forward section firing at the Viet Cong whilst he takes the remaining two sections to the left flank from where he will put in an assault.

After a time the assault goes in but is met by fire from other bunkers on the assaulting troops' flank. Two more of the platoons soldiers are wounded in the assault which goes to ground 20 yards from its objective. The company commander now becomes involved. It is clear now what they have hit. It is a well constructed bunker system with well sited pits, occupied by some twenty five seasoned Viet Cong soldiers. His forward platoon is having an intense fire fight with those in the bunker system which includes trying to bust a couple of selected bunkers with the platoon's M72 anti-tank rockets. The bunkers, however, are strongly constructed and resist the onslaught.

There are two other platoons at the company commander's disposal which he could use to attack the bunker system, but he would never attack such a defended position without a preliminary bombardment from artillery or an air strike. But to bring in artillery or an air strike he will have to pull the company back hundreds of meters from the target. And he knows that as soon as the company disengages, the Viet Cong will be off ; they knowing full well what's in store for them if they don't. The company commander also knows that they will be off when it becomes dark, even if he doesn't disengage.

The company commander talks on radio to the battalion commanding officer (CO). It is not yet midday. The CO realizes there is still time to re-deploy another company by helicopter in the area of the bunker system, they're to establish ambushes on possible egress routes. Meanwhile

the company is to continue to engage the bunker system. The company is also to clear a landing zone some distance from the bunker system from which to evacuate its wounded and receive resupply by helicopter. When the ambushes are in position the company is to withdraw for the air strike and artillery bombardment. So orders the CO. So, when the ambushes are in position, the company breaks contact with the bunker system and withdraws out of the danger area of the bombing and artillery bombardment.

After it is completed the company moves back and finds the bunker system badly damaged but deserted. There is blood and blood soaked shell dressings in some of the bunkers, but no bodies. That night one of the ambushes positioned on the egress routes from the bunker system is sprung and two Viet Cong are killed. The other occupants of the bunker system successfully avoid contact with the Australians as they move out of the area.

Meanwhile, the first company has its three platoons in ambushes on the track system it has discovered. They are now ending their fourth day of waiting. Tomorrow's rations are the last. It is about 11pm and two Viet Cong cradling their AK47 automatic rifles in their arms walk, one some distance behind the other, up the main track towards one of the Australian platoons in ambush. The Australian soldiers are lying on the ground in bunches of three, with one awake and two asleep in each bunch. The soldier whose responsibility it is to spring the ambush by detonating a series of claymore mines has to decide whether to initiate the action with these two Viet Cong or wait in case they are the scouts for a larger body of troops; a much more worthwhile target.

He decides to wait. The two Viet Cong walk through the ambush and disappear along the track. The sentry waits. A Viet Cong appears, then another, then another. They are walking quiet close together. The soldier allows the whole length of the ambush to fill with Viet Cong then fires the claymore mines. The Australian soldiers then lay down intense fire in previously arranged directions and arcs. Those Viet Cong not caught directly in the claymore blast and intense fire, dive for cover and return fire. They gauge whether they can assault this Australian ambush. They decide they cannot but fight on with the hope of retrieving their dead and wounded. Australian artillery is fired into the area round the ambush on the off-chance of causing casualties to withdrawing Viet Cong. Artillery illumination shells are fired to light up the area.

This light makes it difficult for the Viet Cong to retrieve their dead. In this war where the capture of ground is meaningless, only verified enemy dead and prisoners can be the gauge of success. When the fighting dies down, with the illumination shells still being fired, Australian soldiers crawl out and attach ropes to the legs of the dead Viet Cong. They are then dragged into the ambush position, completely safe from retrieval by the Viet Cong. The illumination shells cease and the jungle is pitch black again. An Australian medic is attending a couple of soldiers who were wounded by shrapnel from an RPG rocket exploding on a tree trunk above them.

This operation I have described has taken place at a time when the Viet Cong have decided to avoid contact, when it did not suit them to have a big fight with the Australians.

There were times when, for military or political reasons, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces did decide to have it out with the Australians. Heavy engagements ensued such as the battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral, the battle of Binh Bah and the battle of Long Tan. Most engagements like these were won by the Australians because the Australian well trained infantry held firm while the air/artillery/armor firepower available to them was expertly directed onto the concentrated enemy.

So much for the Australians' task of seeking out and destroying Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units in their sanctuaries, acting as the shield.

The other task Australian commanders set themselves was the breaking of the vital line of communications between the villages and the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military units.

Fundamental to this aim was control of the rural population, and since 1962 there had been programs of relocation and concentration to achieve this. In Phuoc Tuy Province shortly before the Australian Task Force arrived, the outlying and pro-Viet Cong villages of Long Phuoc and Long Tan were destroyed and their inhabitants moved to more easily controlled hamlets.

The Australian Task Force itself destroyed villages in a difficult to control and pro-Viet Cong area called slope 30 and moved the inhabitants to a village built by the Australian Army Engineers called Ap Sui Nai.

Also, hamlets were concentrated with outlying houses being relocated nearer the center. Then barbed wire fences were built around the hamlets leaving normal access by a limited number of gates. There were platoons of about 30 men raised in the villages to defend the integrity of these fences. Finally, there was a curfew enforced on all the rural population between last light (in the evening) and first light (in the morning). Between those times the people had to be inside the fences. Outside became a free fire zone.

These measures did not stop visits to the villages by the Viet Cong. So the task force commanders often deployed Australian troops to ambush in the areas surrounding the villages and sometimes instituted Cordon and Search operations. This is how a Cordon and Search operation might go.

The Task Force Commander orders one of the battalions to "cordon and search" a particular village. He tells the battalion commander that certain soldiers, police and officials of the South Vietnamese government will also be taking part.

On the afternoon before the "cordon and search" is to take place, three rifle companies of the battalion go by truck and then on foot to an area several hours walk from the target village and into a temporary Harbour there. At midnight the three companies leave the Harbour and walk to the outskirts of the village. Each company then moves to its pre-designated sector so that a continuous cordon of soldiers is formed about 100 meters out from the village fence. The companies are in position by 5am.

At first light, the Vietnamese soldiers, police and government officials, along with the fourth rifle company from the Australian battalion, enter the village. An area of clear ground is quickly fenced off with concertina barbed wire, tents erected inside the perimeter and tables and chairs arranged. The villagers are directed into the stockade where government officials wait behind the tables to check identity cards and papers and to ask about the whereabouts of members of the family.

While the villages are being interviewed by the government officials, a mobile kitchen from the battalion is cooking and serving a rice meal to the villagers, and the battalion doctor is treating villagers who queue outside the tent in which he has established his consulting room. The village children are being amused by a Vietnamese puppet show.

In one of the houses a very large sum of money is found by searching police and soldiers. It is considered very likely to be taxes collected by the Viet Cong Infrastructure. The occupants of the house are taken away by the police for more thorough questioning. In the banana grove, Australian soldiers, pushing aside layers of dead palm fronds and banana leaves on the ground, uncover the entrance to an underground bunker. Inside they discover piles of pamphlets with pictures of Ho Chi Minh prominent as well as some bags containing medical supplies. The pamphlets are probably for distribution in the village whilst the medical supplies are thought to have been awaiting collection by or waiting for delivery to a jungle based Viet Cong unit.

Meanwhile in the stockade, the interviewers are dissatisfied with the answers and papers of a young woman and a young man. The officials suspect them of being Viet Cong or Viet Cong

couriers, perhaps come to collect the medical supplies and some of the tax money. They are taken away for further questioning by the police.

For the cordon, the day had been uneventful. No one has tried to escape from the village into the surrounding countryside.

At 3pm the operation is over and the Australian battalion returns to its Nui Dat base by truck.

I've now almost completed what I have to say on the two topics in your syllabus I was asked to cover.

The types of warfare employed by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces were Revolutionary Guerrilla warfare. I have given you an outline of that. The type of warfare employed by the Australian forces was known as anti-Guerrilla warfare, and I've given you an outline of that.

In the process I've also covered something of the role of the Viet Cong, the other syllabus topic.

I have spoken so far only about the response of the Australian armed forces to the challenge of revolutionary guerilla warfare. But what of the response of the armed forces of the United States? And what of the response of the US trained South Vietnamese armed forces.

This is a huge and complex topic which I have neither the time nor the expertise to answer in full. Certainly different elements of the US and South Vietnamese armed forces approached the task in different ways. A difference in approach was also dictated by the different battle conditions found in different areas. For instance, the areas adjacent to the borders with North Vietnam and Cambodia, areas where the armies of North Vietnam could receive large scale resupply, something approaching full-on conventional warfare, was fought.

But whether the US forces were fighting conventional warfare on the borders or trying to come to grips with guerrilla warfare elsewhere, its commanders felt frustrated that it was unable to use its greatest source of firepower, its air-force, to optimum effect. The air-force could not be used to its potential because the targets it might attack were so often hidden from aerial view by the dense jungle canopy.

So the US forces decided to remove this obstruction.

This decision led to Operation Ranch Hand, an operation in which 17 million gallons of chemical defoliants, the best known of which was Agent Orange, were sprayed by aircraft onto the offending jungle canopy.

The operation was a limited success. The removal of the canopy did allow aerial observation of some hitherto hidden areas.

A much more effective solution to the US commanders' problem may have been to have troops skilled in anti-Guerrilla warfare, troops who would see the jungle as a help rather than a hindrance. But most to the US armed forces was trained for a war in Europe against Russia and the other Warsaw Pact countries, a war in which firepower and logistics would be decisive.

The US commanders, therefore had no choice but to try to alter the conditions of the war to suit their training rather than the other way round.

But while Agent Orange and the other herbicides defoliated the canopy as intended, its spraying has unintentionally been the cause of cancer in those, including US and allied soldiers, who were exposed to it. There is even some evidence that exposure to it may be linked with birth abnormalities in veterans' children.

There is one more type of warfare which should be mentioned. Its logic sprung from the interdependence of the work of the Viet Cong Infrastructure and the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese military activity and from the fact that, despite the shield provided by the military presence of the United States and her allies (including Australia), the government of South Vietnam was not winning the hearts and minds of the people. The South Vietnamese governments inability to win the ideological war in the villagers had many causes including endemic corruption and failure to redistribute land, but whatever the reason, despite the US shield providing the opportunity for the South Vietnamese government agencies to counter them, the influence of the Viet Cong Infrastructure remained strong.

If the influence of the Viet Cong Infrastructure could not be destroyed by the attractiveness of the South Vietnamese government and its policies, it would have to be destroyed some other way. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched Operation Phoenix, a measure to gather intelligence on the identity of members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure from a myriad of separate government agencies into one central computer.

The job of dealing with the Viet Cong Infrastructure could not be given to the military forces because, of course, these cadres were civilians. In truth, the cadres should have been dealt with through the civilian legal system but the state of the agencies of the government of South Vietnam made this impossible.

So the CIA established secret assassination squads known as Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) who took what might have been the job of the law into its own hands.

The August 87 edition of Time, (Australian Edition) quoted a South Vietnamese government statistic of 41,000 people identified in Operation Phoenix being assassinated.

This type of warfare is known as Terrorism.

The Vietnam War was a complicated one and not open to purely military solutions. It was a war where politics, ideology and military warfare were woven into a single pattern. It was a war in which military commanders needed an understanding of political matters to make good decisions and where similarly, politicians needed an understanding of military matters to give effective direction. The need for this dual understanding came from the nature of the war.

There were many senior US and allied commanders, civilian and military, whose failure to understand the nature of the war resulted in tragic military mistakes, harmful political direction and dramatically wrong predictions of the progress of the war.

As wars go, then, the war in Vietnam was a most interesting one.