

Tactics in vietnam between 1956 and 1968

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During the Vietnam War, there were many different tactics used by American and Vietcong in order to win the war. These tactics had an influence over the opposition's use and the choice of tactics. From the beginning of the war the Vietcong realised that in order to win they must win the " hearts and the minds" of the peasants. This way they could be provided with shelter, food and such like, also they would be able to enlist more fighters for their cause and above all else the peasants would see that communism was the war which their country should be heading.

In order to do this they operated by a special code dealing with the peasants, they brought up rules such, not to damage the land and crops or spoil the houses, not to insist on buying or borrowing land, never break the rule, to help them with their daily work. These rules ensured that the peasants would support the Vietcong and help them at any opportunity. As well as these gestures of kindness towards the peasants, they would also educate them as to why they were so poor and, explain how much better communism would be to them.

The American on the other hand although realising to some extent that the war was only going to be won with the support of the peasants were far less active in their approach to helping, and indoctrinating them. On the news and publicly they were seen to be helping them but the soldiers were far willing as well as the peasants were already prejudice against the US involvement in the war. An example of the American focussing on the peasants was the " Strategic Hamlet". Under the guidance of the CIA they uprooted whole villages and took the peasants to an enclosed area and kept them under guard.

The idea was to stop the peasants influenced by Vietcong, however, this was an understandably very unpopular tactic, and moreover it turned more peasants against the Americans than it did win the support. American used hightechnologyweapons that were capable of destroying practically anything. They were particularly keen on using their advance and bombs. At first they bombed specific targets but when they realized that this had a little effect, then they began to use blanket bombing, this was known as "Operation Rolling Thunder".

It was a bombing campaign that was put over the North of Vietnam in 1964. It was originally set up to last about eight weeks but in actual fact it continued for over three years. The Vietcong had no such armaments and technology compared to USA, so they relied on using Guerrilla warfare. This was originally adapted by Mao Zedong for use by China; Ho Chi Minh exploited Chinas tactics very carefully. The Guerrilla warfare made it almost impossible for the US to know who was their " friend or foe". Also, they used Ambush techniques to attack enemy and isolated units.

The " Hit and Run" tactics were designed to put small holes in the enemy that eventually amounted to winning the war. The Vietcong resource from the beginning were stretched, not necessarily manpower but weapons and other resources were scarce. So the Vietcong used unexploded bombs to produce Traps such as " Bouncing Bettys", mines that one triggered would jump up and explode around main victim that stands on it. " Booby Traps" such as concealed holes in the ground usually covered by leaves and just deep enough so someone cannot get out.

Also such traps as the " Punji Trap" which is similar to the concealed hole, but with spikes in the bottom. There was also the grenade attached to a trip wire, which meant that when a soldier walked through the wire, the grenade would spring out and explode on them. The idea of these traps was not actually meant to kill the enemy but to maim them. The important point of this was that if someone is dead then they only needed a body bag, but if they are injured the enemy has to spend time and resources healing them instead and the other troops had to hear their comrades scream with pain, which is very draining on morale.

When fighting the Guerrillas would go out in groups and only engage in ambush situations. This meant that they used their knowledge of the area they were fighting in to hinder the USA. This led the American to develop chemical weapons that were used to make the Vietcong more visible. Agent Orange was a chemical defoliant that was used to clear areas of terrain where the Vietcong was suspected to be, but it also caused birth defects among women. Another favourite weapon used by the USA was Napalm.

It was a mixture of petroleum jelly with phosphorous that was dropped from fighter - bombers over suspected Vietcong inhabited areas. All that needed was one drop and then it would burn through to the bone and this caused the victims would die of phosphorous poisoning. America would use a combination of troops that were closely supported by planes and helicopters. The planes would be mounted with a gun known as " Puff the magic dragon", a devastating 30mm cannon that could rip up any thing with a " wall of lead".

The Vietcong were ill - equipped compared to the Americans but they had an establish route called the " Ho Chi Minh Trail" that was a complex web of jungle tracks which ran from North Vietnam to Saigon carrying about 60 tons of aid per day. In the beginning of the war it took six months for a soldier to navigate his way the trial but as the route became to used more often the experienced soldiers was able to get through in six weeks. The Americans was desperately try to bomb the route but it was invisible from the air so it was impossible to hit with any accuracy.

As the war progressed the USA became more and more frustrated because of the increasing number of soldiers they were getting, and the tactics they used became more aggressive. They started to use policies of " Search and Destroy", where groups of troops would go out with the aim of killing any members of the Vietcong they find. They sent small platoons into areas where the tunnels had opening and send men into there with grenade to blow up the Vietcong and shoot any survivors. The troops were trained to think of the Vietcong as scum and had no problem in slaughtering them, and any Vietcong supporters were also killed.

Jets, boats tanks and helicopters would support all of these patrols if they found a suspect target. Whole villages were often raised to the ground to stop a couple of Vietcong members or supporters. The Vietcong used a similar tactic called 'Find and Kill', although this was conceptually the same as 'search and destroy' it was much more successful. One reason for this was that the USA soldiers wore uniforms, therefore it was easier to recognize who

the troops was. Another reason was that the USA soldiers had to contend with Vietcong mines and traps.

America also used " Fire Zones", where a village was warned that they were going to be destroyed by leaflet drops or by word of mouth etc. anyone then found on the area after a specific time was either shot, napalmed, or pineapple bombed which is a single bomb that would explode into thousands of tiny fibreglass balls, so they couldn't be picked up by x - ray. In another attempt to stop the Vietcong Operation Ranch Hand was used, planes would drop chemicals (agent blue) that would destroy crops, the idea being to starve the Vietcong but unfortunately it just turned more of the peasants against the USA.

One USA success was the Tet Offensive. The Vietcong used conventional warfare. It was a disaster and was the closest the US ever came to victory. However it was nowhere near enough to win the war for the US. The USA campaign suffered further after the 'My Lai' massacre. This was when the USA attacked a small village in Vietnam. Its 700 inhabitants were made up mostly of the elderly people, women and children. The soldiers were ordered to kill all the inhabitants in cold blood and burn the village to the ground.

The USA appeared cold and heartless with no regard for human life. When the USA press got hold of the story the American public was shocked and the war became even less popular. Particularly so as it was revealed that most of the inhabitants of My Lai were not in fact Vietcong. By the late 60's America became desperate, and decided to employ a much-feared and unpopular tactic, the use of chemical weapons. These weapons included napalm and

Agent Orange, which stripped the land bare, making guerrilla tactics harder to carry out.

However the use of such weapons produced some horrific injuries and pictures, which the press thrived upon, there were already several active peace movements in America. The US made a terrible mistake in allowing them to be covered by the press. The Vietcong were party to some terrible atrocities, but because they never allowed themselves to be followed into battle these were never seen. The media portrayal of the war was a major factor, as it is in any modern war. Already horrific stories and pictures are sensationalized, and can influence people almost totally.

By 1967 the career soldiers had almost all been used and so the government introduced conscription. This meant that many soldiers were there against their will and wanted only to finish their tour of duty. They started to care less and less about winning the war as they were more occupied with staying alive. Consequently the morale suffered, ragging occurred more often for unpopular commands. The Vietcong on the other hand were highly motivated, they were fighting for a cause they believed in, and were there on their own free will, even women were allowed and willing to fight.

As the war went on they became more confident, better armed and trained. This led to the "Tet Offensive". On the January 31st, 1968, more than 70,000 Vietcong launched an attack on more than a hundred cities and towns. In Saigon they managed to enter the US Embassy building and kill 5 marines, and take over a local radio station. In military terms the Americans won, an estimated 37,000 Vietcong soldiers were killed compared to the 2,500

American troops, but it proved to the soldiers and the American public that the Vietcong had an inexhaustible supply of people and that the Americans would not win the war.