

**WHEN REASON FAILS:  
Portraits of Armies at  
War: America, Britain,  
Israel, and the Future**

*Michael Goodspeed*

**PRAEGER**

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Michael Goodspeed

Studies in Military History and International Affairs  
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PRAEGER

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Michael Goodspeed





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# Introduction

In a knowledge of the human heart must be sought the secrets of the success and failure of armies.

—Marshall de Saxe

Madame Montholon , having inquired what troops Napoleon considered the best, “Those which are victorious, Madame” replied the Emperor.

—Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne,  
Secretary to Napoleon

Armies are among the most important institutions on the globe. Their temperament and employment exert a profound influence on the world’s population because, ultimately, global freedom, security and prosperity are rooted and sustained by the world’s armies. All organizations have their own distinct characters. This is especially true of armies who more than other institutions, reflect not only their national character but also their own distinguishing idiosyncrasies. At the outset of the twenty-first century the world’s armies are scattered across the military spectrum in a qualitative jumble with at least as many organizationally distinct armies as there are nations. Sadly, as institutions, the world’s armies have historically never experienced an employment shortage. That may be changing. Notwithstanding the terrorist atrocities of September 11, 2001, wars may have become a less frequent scourge in this century than they were in the last. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute there were in the first year of the new millennium 35 wars raging in the world. If the statistics since the end of the Cold War constitute any kind of a trend, the number of major conflicts in the world is slowly but steadily shrinking. But in spite of this, it is doubtful that we shall live to see war eradicated in the same manner that small pox was eliminated earlier in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, for reasons examined in the final chapter of this book, there is a distant possibility that war may be contained and its effects greatly diminished. But if this is to happen, the world must understand the nature of its armies as well as their current social, technological and political context.

Today’s armies run the gamut in sophistication and size. At one extreme of the organizational band are armies such as those found in the Congo, little more than primitive local militia forces protecting their tribal fields and villages with spears and machetes. Further out in the spectrum in places such as the Southern Sudan illiterate but enthusiastic peasant volunteers with surplus Soviet equipment wage a merciless and unyielding war against their Northern counterparts. In the jungles of Colombia well-equipped criminal paramilitary organizations stand guard over the wilderness empires of drug dealers. From secret urban enclaves,

terrorist groups representing a variety of political and nationalist grievances threaten the stability of a score of nations. Throughout the Balkans brutal and ill-disciplined militias operate alongside the ruthless but well trained remnants of Yugoslavia's Army. In the deserts, mountains and river valleys of Central Asia, China's vast and tightly disciplined army of nuclear and conventionally armed conscripts patiently drill for civil insurrection or possible wars with her neighbors. Further west Russian troops in the central Caucasus bombard determined Chechen rebels in the suburbs of Grozny and in their mountain hideouts. While at the more developed end of the spectrum, in Europe, where new-found political stability and economic growth has spawned a peace dividend, well-armed professional armies patiently train for a wide range of violent scenarios. But at the far end of the continuum, in a league of its own and armed with the most imposing arsenal in history is the professional high-tech colossus maintained by the United States.

As this book goes to press, American and British forces have made the first air and cruise missile strikes on those responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This new campaign and this new form of war will no doubt develop in its own distinct manner. As yet, no one is certain what the division between clandestine and conventional military effort will be in this conflict. What is clear is that America's Army is probably the best suited force in the world for adapting to this new type of warfare.

America's all-volunteer army is easily the world's most sophisticated, both in its armament and in the numbers and kinds of units in its order of battle. With few exceptions American weapons and equipment are the most advanced; and, the U.S. Army's training system makes the most effective use of high tech simulation anywhere. In the realm of training and doctrine, America has the world's most elaborate complex of military schools and possesses more staff colleges and think tanks than any other force in the history of warfare. In terms of technical and organizational development, the post-Cold War U.S. Army has set the standard for the world's fighting forces. It is only with regard to intangibles that the rest of the world's armies can begin to find favorable measures with which to judge themselves against America's military giant. When making an assessment of their relative effectiveness, other armies must talk in terms of morale, discipline, pride, fighting spirit and esprit de corps. Without question, all of these measures are both fundamental and more often than not define the difference between victory and defeat. But on any measurable, quantifiable basis, America's army has no peer. The rest of the world studies her example closely. And although the Americans were somewhat later than many of her key allies in creating a professional army, when they did so, the Pentagon's planners were shrewd in how they reshaped the new organization's culture. In the new army soldiering has rapidly evolved around the twin themes of technology and professionalism. Amongst the developed and politically stable nations of the world, standing professional armies based on this new American pattern have rapidly become the dominant kind of military force.

In this book I have consciously used the concept of an "army" loosely. I have concentrated on land warfare because it is the mode of conflict that has most strongly influenced our world. In my examination of different armies, I have freely included the nature of their intelligence and police services; and, where it was fitting and served to portray the character of the belligerents, I have illustrated my analysis with examples

drawn from naval and air actions. I have also confined my analysis to armies at war, and in doing so have consciously excluded the field of peacekeeping. Peacekeeping is important and will likely continue to develop as a military task, but unhappily, fighting continues to be of greater importance as a means of conflict resolution; and so I have deliberately confined this study to armies at war.

One of the concepts central to my analysis has been that it may be a truism that the human quality of armies makes the difference in war. But the human quality of an army is largely governed by the combined influences of routine administrative policies and the political motives underlying those policies. Moral leadership and battlefield performance are inextricably anchored to the mundane and procedural as well as a society's fundamental sense of purpose. In a highly technological world, one characterized by a painful ambivalence about the morality of war, we are perpetually in danger of losing sight of this.

This book has been written with a view to providing an alternate means of examining modern armies. By looking at the organizational attributes and behavioral traits of the American, British and Israeli armies in three modern wars we can better understand the situations facing us today and prepare for those conflicts that we shall inevitably confront tomorrow. The current military archetype upon which the developed nations have fashioned their armies has been founded on experiences gained in a handful of recent wars and, most importantly, the collective thinking and intensive introspection that followed the American Army's tragedy in Vietnam. In redesigning the U.S. Army after Vietnam, the institutional architects of the new army, Generals Starry and DePuy created a new paradigm for warfare, one that we have yet to fully come to grips with. The world's new armies are pinning their effectiveness on high tech weaponry and military professionalism but they are also being guided by the experience derived from the most influential campaigns of recent history. Those campaigns are Vietnam, the Arab-Israeli Wars and Northern Ireland.

I have attempted to provide a balanced view of these armies and the wars they fought. In doing so I have not tried to conceal or downplay the failings and shortcomings that are inevitably a part of any human endeavor. Some may feel that inclusion of these unsavory incidents unfairly tarnishes an army's record of sacrifice and commitment. I cannot agree with this viewpoint. Battle is man's most arduous and emotionally draining activity and to knowingly gloss over conspicuous elements of failure would be to do an injustice to those who served honorably and without incident and would lessen their achievements in those circumstances in which they triumphed.

*When Reason Fails* examines those wars through the experiences of the armies that fought them. The Duke of Wellington in a prescient but irascible mood when asked about the Battle of Waterloo once sniffed "The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball."<sup>1</sup> In this vein I believe there is at least as much to be learned by studying the collective characters and abilities of the participants as there is by cataloging and analyzing the numbers, movements and dispositions of the combatants. Armies consist of men, equipment and ideas and to understand how war is likely to shape our world, we would do well to better understand more about the men, the organizations and the ideas that have done so much to define our present and direct our future.



# Chapter 1

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## The American Army in Vietnam

I never thought it would go on like this. I didn't think these people had the capacity to fight this way. If I had thought they could take this punishment and fight this well, could enjoy fighting like this, I would have thought differently at the start. . . .<sup>1</sup>

—Robert McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defense

The American experience in Vietnam has proven to be one of the most crucial influences on the modern world's attitudes to war. More influential than many longer and bloodier conflicts, for the first time in history Vietnam provided the world a prolonged and disturbingly graphic view of war via the nightly television news. Despite being over for more than a quarter of a century, the legacy of Vietnam still has far-reaching strategic, economic and social consequences.

The American phase of the Vietnam War was arguably the world's most controversial conflict. And as such "Vietnam" played a defining role in shaping global attitudes on such far reaching themes as how nations should coexist and the obligations and relationships of the individual to the parent society. In North America and Europe reactions to the Vietnam War helped spawn a new era of social activism that has in many respects transformed modern society. The moral complexity of the conflict as well as the deep rooted and emotional impact of the American phase of the war renders generalizations about the justness of its cause, tentative at best. To try to create an image of what the war was really like is beyond the scope of this work because there is unlikely to be any single, accurate picture of such a diverse and complex conflict. Nonetheless, if we are to come to terms with the war's effects, we must understand the conditions that determined how the war was fought. This chapter seeks to identify the central factors that established how the war was waged and why the American Army performed as it did.

The American experience in Vietnam has not only shaped modern attitudes on both the efficacy and morality of war, but it has also redefined expectations as to what nations have come to expect of their armies. Because of the moral uncertainties of the war, most contemporary assessments of the conflict have for the most part sought either to justify or indict American participation. In this debate the conditions of service and the achievements of the American soldier have been largely and in some cases maliciously overlooked.<sup>2</sup> In America the officers and soldiers who served for this doomed cause became scapegoats for a confused and self-serving political machine; and after the war, most ignominiously, the sacrifices of these men were ignored by both doves and hawks.

Recent interpretations of the war have tried to attribute the war's loss almost exclusively to liberal failings. Defeat was due to a stab in the back, the war was being won and had America only stayed the course a short while longer the communists would have been defeated. Such revisionism echoes the deeply flawed strategic judgments of the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Many of these kinds of theories that reduce the tragedy of Vietnam to a series of one dimensional hypotheses invariably have an element of truth in them. But in the final analysis, they are no more accurate than scores of earlier simplicities. Explanations such as the war's loss was the fault of the press or because Americans tried to fight a guerrilla war using conventional doctrine touch upon aspects of the Army's performance but they ignore the inherent complexity of combat.

In a purely military sense, if such a phrase can ever be used any more, America's involvement in Vietnam still leaves many issues that have not been resolved. Some of the most important and most painful of these are the factors that influenced how the soldier fought. Beyond the realm of action films and the occasional bland documentary, Vietnam has with only a few notable exceptions been a war America would rather forget about. In forgetting why the war was fought in the manner in which it was, a great disservice has been done to the men and women who served there.

An enormous amount of material has been written and produced about the war but the bulk of the popular accounts of the war tend to be historical and fictional narratives that have reinforced comfortable assumptions explaining why things happened as they did. Explanations for the war and the manner of its conduct have long since blurred into the soft focus impression that Vietnam was an ill-fated aberration, a painful memory best forgotten of tragedy and military failure. However, the precise causes and responsibility for the Vietnam debacle can be accurately identified. The military disintegration and domestic turmoil of the Vietnam era should in the final analysis be laid at the feet of a small group of men. The evidence leads inescapably to the conclusion that despite the very serious problems that assailed the army in the latter half of the war, America's soldiers were as valiant and as militarily adept as any generation of her soldiers. It was in the final stages of the American phase of the conflict that many soldiers, acting individually in accordance with clear and entirely unofficial political and strategic signals, chose simply to survive the war rather than fight it. Responsibility for the war's conduct and its outcome must be attributed primarily to a broad range of far-reaching decisions made by the country's politicians and second, the most senior leadership of the armed forces. America's soldiers were placed in an impossible

strategic position and were limited by a large number of impractical institutional constraints. That elements of the army eventually exhibited a mixture of symptoms indicative of a greater malady was no fault of its troops or its middle ranking leadership.

In this respect the successes and shortcomings of the U.S. Army's involvement in Vietnam are most sharply brought into focus by examining the roles and performance of the foot soldier. Despite the carpet bombing by squadrons of B52s, fire bases bristling with artillery, the helicopters, the fleets of exotic gun-ships and the staggering number of close air support sorties flown by jet fighter bombers; the performance of the American foot soldier with an M16 rifle in his hands provides history with a true indication of the army's strengths and weaknesses. The war's tactical outcome was largely determined by the American infantryman's accomplishments. In turn, the infantryman was greatly influenced and profoundly affected by his political superiors, the senior leadership of the army, the officer corps, the non-commissioned officers and the peculiarities of Vietnam itself.

## THE AMERICAN PHASE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The American phase of the Vietnam War was a prolonged one. American infantry units were committed to combat from March 6, 1965 until March 29, 1973. Of the 8,744,000 Americans who served in the Armed Forces during this period, 58,022 died and over 313,000 were wounded as a result of Vietnam service. It was the longest and the most publicized war in America's history, and it is the only war that America lost. Because America lost the war and because so much of our current attitude to conflict has been shaped as a result of Vietnam, a great many myths and half-truths have developed surrounding America's participation. Hence, it is doubly important that the conditions affecting the American soldier and the factors contributing to America's defeat are clearly understood.

It is often said that ultimately in war it is the quality of the individual soldier that counts. This barroom truism belies a complex web of factors that contribute to military effectiveness. The factors that motivate the average soldier must be understood by more than just the senior noncommissioned officers and unit officers who lead their nation's warriors into battle. The elements that determine how an army and its individual soldiers will acquit themselves in war are often subtle, varied and far-reaching. At the highest levels the politicians and generals of the Vietnam era failed to understand this. As a consequence, at the lower levels there was a widespread tendency to accord too great an importance to the value of the technical support and military training that a soldier received while many of the most important human factors were either overlooked or ignored in assessing the soldier's capacity to fight.

The measure of a nation's capability to wage war is only partially revealed in a survey of her order of battle and an inventory of her modern equipment. The intangible factors that contribute to high military morale are deeply embedded in the army's parent society. This was an element that was forgotten by America's senior political and military leadership who too readily committed their soldiers to fight a major war without paying due regard to what was needed to inspire those troops to fight.



## STRATEGIC FACTORS

Of all the factors that influenced the performance of America's soldiers the most important was the choice of strategy to fight the war. America's involvement in Vietnam was a reluctant one characterized by the gradual escalation and de-escalation of force. In attempting to win the war by fighting a prolonged, low intensity conflict contained within the borders of South Vietnam, America allowed her enemies to wage a classic form of revolutionary war that eventually sapped her willpower without destroying her means to fight.<sup>4</sup>

American participation in the war can be viewed in three phases. The first phase was an advisory, ostensibly non-combative period that lasted from America's decision to send military advisors until her decision to send formed units of Marines with the express purpose of engaging in ground combat. The second phase was characterized by a period of steady escalation of troop levels and a concurrent intensification of the fighting. The final distinct phase covered the period from when President Johnson announced his intention to withdraw and negotiate for peace and the last American ground combat units withdrew from Vietnamese soil.

Throughout most of her involvement in the conflict, within South Vietnam America based her strategy to win the war on three essential components. U.S. forces initially sought to control and secure their base areas. From the base areas they would then conduct patrol and pacification operations to dominate and clear their immediate area of operational responsibility. And last, to seize the initiative, they conducted an aggressive campaign of deliberate search and destroy operations in areas designated as communist strongholds in order to wear the enemy down.

The decision to wear the enemy down within South Vietnam was undeniably the greatest strategic error of the war. Unwilling to risk fighting a war with either the Soviet Union or China, President Johnson chose to confine American ground combat to his allies' territory. In retrospect this decision was both naively optimistic and breathtakingly arrogant. Johnson truly believed he could win the war inside South Vietnam and avoid drawing the two communist superpowers into war. At the same time he believed he could out-maneuver Congress and fight a mid intensity war without securing legislative support. While engaged in a major war he fully expected to maintain a state of peacetime normalcy with no major disruption to life at home. Unfortunately, LBJ's *modus operandi* failed him. In the wider strategic arena Johnson's highly developed political talents proved to be liabilities. Had Lyndon Johnson been less head strong and if his professional experience and operating methods not been so deeply rooted in the art of cunning political deal making and Congressional subterfuge, America would almost certainly have been spared the ordeal of Vietnam. But to the core Johnson was a sly politician and for most of his presidency he was disdainful of the opinions of those outside his realm of experience. The president's personal shortcomings provide essential lessons for future generations as to the overriding importance of presidential character in determining the course of history. The evidence leads one to believe that Johnson's character failings were not failings of integrity but rather of temperament. His greatest political ambition was not to lead his nation in war but to steer America into a prosperous and racially integrated "Great Society." Despite being well intentioned, Johnson blundered when forced to exercise caution and independent judgment in an area beyond his expertise. From the outset the U.S. president completely

misunderstood the situation in Vietnam and he compounded his mistakes when he was called on to lead without the benefit of a carefully developed policy script. The disastrous strategic plan inflicted on the U.S. Army was a consequence of fate and the character deficiencies of the nation's Commander in Chief.

Relatively unmolested in their sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos American strategy allowed the communists to rest, reorganize and regroup after every major campaign. With a strategic policy that confined the fighting to South Vietnam, the communists could constantly pump regular soldiers and guerrillas into the South as long as their own base areas and lines of communication were left intact. With such a near permanent arrangement the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (VC) always held the strategic initiative. They chose when and where they would concentrate their energies. Although this was by no means a guarantee of tactical success, retaining the initiative allowed the communists to choose their battles and in doing so measure their efforts to ensure the greatest impact.

For a society such as America that is accustomed to getting what it wants promptly, the cumulative effect of this strategic policy was to make the American public, and eventually her soldiers war weary. The Vietnamese communists were willing to pay a far heavier price for their victory for they always knew that under these conditions, time was on their side. General Giap once admitted casually to a reporter as early on as 1969 that he estimated the North Vietnamese Army's war dead to be at least half a million men.<sup>5</sup> The North Vietnamese were from the outset always prepared to accept high casualties to win the war. With no end in sight, the war appeared to the Americans to be senseless and therefore without justification. Within a few years American society and ultimately the American Army became demoralized and the will to win evaporated.

American withdrawal from Vietnam was a painfully slow one. From the time Lyndon Johnson announced in his speech outlining his plans not to seek a second term as president, that he was now striving for an "honorable peace" the North Vietnamese knew they had won the war. No matter what Richard Nixon would threaten or promise, no matter how he increased the bombing of the North, the communists knew they would triumph. The sight of Lyndon Johnson, haggard and defeated in front of the television cameras announcing to the world that he had had enough was a strong signal to the North Vietnamese that America was now only fighting to save face and would eventually abandon her Vietnamese allies.

Johnson's change of heart was largely brought about not by his refusal to endure more casualties, but by the political influence of the anti-war movement in the United States. The anti-war movement that helped to bring about LBJ's decision had deep roots in America's political culture. The undeniable strength of American democratic traditions, a vigorous belief in freedom of speech and a climate of political tolerance have been key factors in establishing America's global dominance in scientific, cultural and commercial fields. In times of war these fundamental national attributes have periodically combined with strong intellectual undercurrents of isolationism and pacifism. The qualities that have enabled America to enjoy world industrial, scientific and cultural leadership for the past century have also surfaced in time of war as low-key traditions that have hampered war efforts in several conflicts. The British Empire Loyalists, the Copperhead Movement in the Civil War, Lindbergh, Jane Fonda and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War all share a common heritage.

The Vietnam War came close upon the heels of a global ground swell of pacifism borne in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the early days of protest against nuclear armaments. This was a time when the effects of the Cuban Missile crisis were still being felt. It was America's first major war under conditions where a potential enemy could be supported by nuclear weapons and it was a time of rising prosperity and high expectations. The United States wasn't in the mood for a protracted war. After two and a half years of intense combat when America's president began talking about negotiating an "honorable peace" resentful conscripts in the field quite understandably began to mutter that they weren't going to be the last man to die in the 'Nam.

The North Vietnamese victory in Vietnam almost certainly lengthened the Cold War. For at least a decade it colored communist perceptions of the West. The most powerful nation in the world suffered military defeat at the hands of a technologically backward and beleaguered agrarian nation. America attempted by force of arms to thwart the unification of Vietnam under a communist regime and she failed. It was a failure that initiated an agonizing period of self-doubt and wrongly caused many of America's citizens, allies and foes to question both her resolve and abilities. America failed in Vietnam not because as a nation she lacked the character, determination or courage to achieve victory but because the senior military and political leadership chose to ignore the country's motivation. They compounded their folly by adopting a strategy of attrition assuming that a protracted war could be won without unduly stretching America's military capacity and involving only a limited national effort.

On a military level, the war in Vietnam provides a unique opportunity to study conventional war, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism in the same theater and at the same time. The North Vietnamese and the VC's prosecution of this prolonged conflict serves as the classic example of Mao Zedong's teachings on the conduct of a phased revolutionary war. Protracted counterrevolutionary war has its own unique problems that present enormous difficulties for any power. But Vietnam also had other complicating factors. It was America's, and the world's, first war in the television age. With a highly efficient electronic media, ideas and impressions could be passed more quickly and much more graphically than ever before to the entire nation. In this respect, the psychological dimension of warfare assumed even more importance than it had in the past. The effect of popular opinion, militant pressure groups, and a sensationalist and impatient electronic media became as important as tactical dispositions and relative strengths on the battlefield.

Factors that influenced the nature of America's military involvement were complex ones. The strategy adopted to fight the war was without question, a fundamental mistake, but this strategic blunder was amplified by several institutional and cultural problems that gave the war its peculiar character. To understand what happened in the American phase of the war several unique critical areas must be examined. America's assessment of the enemy, the tactics and equipment used, leadership in the officer corps, the role of the noncommissioned officer as well as the social problems and values of the period all directly affected how the army functioned.

America's earliest military involvement in Vietnam was during the French colonial period. The French Army that fought the Viet Minh was almost entirely supplied and financed by the United States. Following the spectacular communist victory at Dien Bien Phu and France's withdrawal from South East Asia, the country was partitioned at the 17th parallel. Ho Chi Minh's communist party ruled in the North and the South became sovereign under Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955. With France's withdrawal from Indo China, American soldiers assumed an advisory role with responsibilities for the training and organizational development of the Vietnamese Army.

Prior to the country's partition, the United States had been deeply involved in Vietnam through the CIA. Notwithstanding this, America did not resort to overt armed military assistance with formed units until March of 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson ordered two battalions of Marines to assist with the defense of the Da Nang airfield to free South Vietnamese troops to conduct operations against the VC. By 1968, American troop levels were to peak at 540,000 men.<sup>6</sup>

## GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Geographically South Vietnam is characterized by the Anamite Mountain chain running through the middle of the northern and central provinces. The coastal lowlands bordering the South China Sea are relatively flat, heavily populated and intensely cultivated for rice production. The foothills adjoining the mountains and the coastal plains are more lightly populated and are sparsely cultivated for various crops in addition to rice. Forested areas are a combination of primary and secondary jungle. The southern provinces are part of a large deltoid plain formed by the Mekong River. The climate of South Vietnam is an equatorial one with only slight temperature changes between winter and summer. Monsoon rains vary in intensity from year to year and place to place but the northern provinces are subject to mists and fine rain throughout the winter. At the time of the war just under twenty million people lived in South Vietnam, the majority of them were Buddhists. During the American phase of the war there were a million and a half Catholics in the South, 800,000 Montagnard aboriginals and an equal number of Chinese as well as small minorities of Cambodians and Chams. In South Vietnam there are numerous medium sized towns and two large cities, Saigon with a population of a million and a half and Da Nang with 221,000 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

South Vietnam's western border abuts onto Laos and Cambodia, two ostensibly neutral countries who in practice had little choice but to ignore the fact that the Ho Chi Minh trail, North Vietnam's principal line of communications into the South, ran through both their territories. Despite its name, The Ho Chi Minh Trail was anything but a simple trail. Work began on the trail as early as 1959. It was in parts fifty miles wide and consisted of hundreds of jungle paths, dirt tracks, gravelled roads, river transport systems and an elaborate but ingeniously primitive network of rest stations and fuel pipelines. It also had alongside it engineering, road and bridge repair facilities, air defense sites, supply dumps, arsenals, vehicle transport compounds, maintenance depots, tactical and political training centers, POW holding camps, guide posts, hospitals and even improvised factories. Most of the infrastructure was underground. It was manned at the height of the war by fifty thousand garrison troops and by 1969 became the principal conduit for over sixty

thousand soldiers infiltrating into South Vietnam annually. It was an incredible example of meticulous strategic and operational foresight and planning and a very strong case can be made that its operation was history's greatest military engineering and logistic feat of arms.

Maintenance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a costly endeavor. Throughout the war all troops on the Trail were susceptible to malaria, parasitical infections, TB, yellow fever and dysentery. More dangerous than the trail's diseases was American air power. As America's involvement in the war grew, so too did her capacity to inflict punishing aerial bombardments of troops using the Trail. With the exception of some very daring but nonetheless strategically insignificant long range special reconnaissance patrols, political considerations and the neutral façade maintained by Laos and Cambodia kept large scale American and South Vietnamese ground incursions safely away from the North's main supply route. (The one notable exception to this was the 1970 invasion of Cambodia which came too late and proved to be too limited in its scope to be of long term consequence.) However, for much of the war U.S. air power hammered the Ho Chi Minh Trail relentlessly. The North Vietnamese have not released reliable figures on the casualty rate incurred as a result of American bombing of the Trail but it was undoubtedly horrific. Visual reconnaissance, thermal imaging photography, aerial-delivered ground-motion sensors and bizarre "people sniffers," such as those that sensed traces of human urine and sweat, furnished a constant stream of targets for swarms of fighter bombers and squadrons of B52s. Without warning, U.S. bombers regularly rained hundreds of tons of high explosive on NVA troops from several miles up in the sky.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was not important simply in its geographical and strategic context. The continued operation of the trail stands as testimony to the character of the communist enemy that America's Army faced. The NVA soldier was as tough, courageous and as crafty as any foe ever faced by American soldiers. He has been popularly portrayed as a cruel inscrutable fanatic who needed few rations to survive, had the instincts of an animal in the bush and had no natural fear of death or wounding. The truth is somewhat different from the popular conception.

## THE COMMUNIST SOLDIER

Communist soldiers in Vietnam could be divided into three classes. There were the regular uniformed North Vietnamese Army troops who fought in established units and formations. Most NVA soldiers were recruited from the urban conglomeration around Hanoi or from villages in the rural paddy areas of the northern plains. NVA troops were no more naturally suited to the rigors of jungle warfare than were the city and farm boys drafted from Middle America. In addition to the NVA, there were regular VC troops who were full-time guerrilla soldiers. And last, there were local VC troops who stayed at home and fought a clandestine war at night and farmed by day.<sup>8</sup>

The local VC varied widely in their military capabilities. In some areas they were highly regarded when they were well led, but for the most part, they were not considered a major threat. Their training was quite elementary and they were sparsely equipped with a variety of small arms, grenades and explosives. Their equipment ranged from captured American and old French equipment to Soviet pattern automatic rifles. In a fight, the local VC almost always lost. They did not

have the training, the equipment or the numbers to do much damage, although on very rare occasions, they would mass to company and even battalion strength to strike at vulnerable positions. The local VC did a great deal of damage by laying booby traps and mines as well as punji stake traps on likely enemy trails. The VC proved to be extremely cunning in this form of warfare and what they lacked in the traditional military skills, they more than compensated for in waging this type of combat. Local VC forces were also often used to act as a screen through which NVA or regular VC units would withdraw after a major action. They were particularly well suited to this task because of their intimate knowledge of the local area and their ability to blend in quickly with the populace. Perhaps more important than their military strength, the widespread presence of local VC cadres provided a compelling political alternative to the peasants of South Vietnam. The very fact that an indigenous VC organization existed served to divide the peasants loyalty and robbed the Southern forces and their allies of the overwhelming support they needed to be successful in this kind of guerrilla war.

The regular VC were in fact professional guerrillas. Forty percent of them were recruited or impressed in the South, endured a grueling march north to be trained and marched south again to serve in an area different from their home. The remainder were specially trained North Vietnamese. The regular or "hard core" or "main force" VC as they were often called were capably led by dedicated professional officers and NCOs. For the most part, their senior officers had experience fighting the French and all of them had been around war long enough to give them a healthy collective measure of battle experience. Like their local counterpart, most of the Southerners had the outlook of seasoned veterans before they joined. The regular VC soldier was stringently, but contrary to popular belief, not harshly disciplined by his leaders. Nonetheless, his morale fluctuated. In 1966, a thousand of them were defecting to the Americans or other allies every month.<sup>9</sup> By 1968 their morale and discipline had improved dramatically and this desertion rate dropped to almost nothing.

The regular VC were physically and mentally tough soldiers. They were prepared to endure deprivation and their standard of field craft was extremely high. They could wait silently in a jungle ambush for long periods of time, carry heavy loads for long distances and spend hours silently stalking an enemy position. They were adequately trained when they arrived in their area of responsibility in the south and their training continued when they were not actively engaged on operations. As a rule of thumb, while serving in South Vietnam they received two thirds of their training in technical and tactical skills and one third in political propaganda. They spent a great deal of their time training at night and proved to be a very dangerous opponent after dark.

The regular VC soldier was well supported by an elaborate infrastructure. There were troops responsible for pay, supply services, training and political cadres, taxation of VC controlled areas and in some instances, primitive medical services. They had a definite organizational structure, clear rules governing promotion policies and even a precisely defined grievance system. However, it should be stressed that in the VC organization, there was no administrative fat and the ratio of fighting troops to service troops bore absolutely no resemblance to that of a modern Western army.



The regular VC was better equipped than the local VC although their equipment scales were extremely light. The standard weapon was the AK-47 assault rifle. They had light and medium mortars, grenades of Chinese and American manufacture, Soviet sniper rifles, light and medium machine guns, B40 rocket propelled grenades and various explosives and demolitions for use in the construction of mines and booby traps.

By 1968 there were between seventy and eighty thousand VC operating in South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Many lived in villages within the allied area of influence; many more lived in rudimentary camps and villages in the jungle and others operated out of fantastically elaborate tunnel complexes. Some tunnel complexes were found to be as much as 30 kilometers in length. Most tunnel systems in South Vietnam had been developed according to a central plan and were prepared and improved on over several years.

Main force VC were by no stretch of the imagination paragons of austere military virtues. And certainly, unlike the way they were portrayed in their own propaganda, they were not stoic and essentially noble peasant warriors. They were tough, dedicated and cunning but they were also vicious and utterly ruthless with their own people as a matter of policy. For the VC, mass murder was an accepted tactic, not a disciplinary failing and in this respect they were altogether completely different from their American opponents. Throughout the war, the VC executed scores of thousands of Vietnamese civilians when they took control of an area. For years they waged a bloody and continuous program of assassination of village chiefs, local officials, schoolteachers and any other figures of importance who could have even the most remote connection with the Southern government.

The North Vietnamese Army was composed of long service conscripts, who unlike the American soldiers fighting against them, were in for the duration of the war. The NVA soldier was well trained and well disciplined. A considerable period of his training was spent inculcating in him enthusiasm for communist ideology and patriotic fervor. He was certainly a patriotic soldier and he took enormous pride in the fact that his army had already convincingly defeated the French. He was prepared to do the same thing to the Americans and what he considered to be their South Vietnamese puppets. Throughout the war it was often reported that the North Vietnamese soldier was an unwilling and sullen conscript who was kept in the army by brutally fanatical officers and NCOs, but the evidence against this view is overwhelming. Defections from the North Vietnamese Army were never great in terms of relative numbers and this was despite the hardship and privations suffered by the northern soldier.

The North Vietnamese soldier certainly must have suffered a great deal. We can only guess at what the NVA non-battle casualty rate was from disease, but living in the jungles of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia under the conditions that pervaded, it must have been very high. His discipline was extremely strict and the penalties for disciplinary lapses were savage and immediate. Nonetheless, this does not mean that he was motivated solely by fear of his leaders. To accept the viewpoint that the NVA Regular was a completely unwilling military slave is not consistent with his battlefield performance. His initiative, tenacity, courage and stamina were maintained for years in the face of appallingly heavy casualties.

From the time he began his trek south down the Ho Chi Minh trail the NVA soldier lived a life of danger coupled with severe physical and mental stress. He carried his assault rifle and personal ammunition, a water bottle, Chinese stick hand grenades, a spare khaki uniform, a plastic poncho, a hammock, pictures of his family and girlfriend and frequently, a diary. In addition he would also carry a heavy burden of ammunition or bulk supplies of food to be stockpiled in the south for future operations.<sup>11</sup> Once in the south, he spent the largest part of his time hiding in the jungle or in hand dug caves and tunnels. On small unit patrol actions and ambushes he usually gave a good account of himself but when he was led forward for conventional offensive operations, he invariably suffered far greater casualties than he inflicted. Yet despite this, he soldiered on and eventually triumphed.

### THE AMERICAN SOLDIER

The American infantryman in Vietnam differed in numerous respects from his Vietnamese opponent. Like the communist foot soldiers there were several different kinds of American infantry serving in South Vietnam; line or "leg" infantry units, Rangers, Marine infantry, air cavalry, mechanized infantry and specialized units such as the U.S. Army Special Forces and the U.S. Navy's SEAL (Sea Air Land) units; all of which were nevertheless infantry as they did their fighting on their feet and engaged the enemy in close combat.

The average American infantryman was a conscripted soldier. The American draft is worth studying as it was a selective service system and not a universal one. It had far reaching effects on the fighting qualities of the soldier sent out to Vietnam. In order to maintain the support of the middle class for the war, President Johnson through the House Armed Services Committee gave college students a deferment from the draft. The college deferment coupled with the existing occupational deferment system meant that the sons of poor whites and blacks were drafted into the army while the middle classes stayed at home. Initially, before American opposition to the war grew, this deferment system did not adversely affect the conscripted soldier. He may not have been happy at finding himself in the army but in the early days of the Vietnam War, he regarded military duty as a patriotic obligation that he dutifully accepted. The downstream effect the college deferment had on the army was to distort its representative nature and contribute to growing morale problems. Blacks were about 13% of the American population and were proportionately represented in the armed forces of the time but most noticeably during the latter half of the war 28.6% of the soldiers in combat units were black.<sup>12</sup> Americans of Hispanic descent were also over-represented in combat arms units. And most visibly, less than 2% of the officer corps was black. All this took place at a time when the civil rights movement was one of the most pressing domestic issues of the period. In retrospect, it would have been a staggering achievement had a large portion of the officer corps been drawn from the black population so soon after the beginnings of the civil rights movement. But as the Vietnam War progressed, the impression that this was a war being fought by poor blacks on behalf of whites was to have a powerful effect on the soldiers' attitude to the sacrifices being demanded of him. Those tensions that were prevalent in American society were later to create unavoidable and serious problems within the army's units fighting in Vietnam.