

War Again - Vietnam

Knowing my War College year would be coming to an end in June, I took the initiative to influence my next assignment. The Vietnam War was on, I am a Soldier, so I reasoned I should enter the fray as soon as I graduated from the War College.

I learned from DSOPS - the Army staff section that knows such things, that a Major General John Tillson was going to Vietnam to command the 1st Infantry Division - the Big Red One.

So I wrote him on the 3d of January 1967 to request that he accept me as a Battalion Commander when I get there that the Army was willing to honor my request to be assigned to Vietnam and would even assign me to the 1st Division. And I laid out my credentials.

He answered me on the 1st of February, saying he would be glad to accept me, but that he was being changed to command the 25th Division, instead of the 1st. And would arrive in March, That he asked General Seitz - the Personnel chief in the Army Staff whether I could be assigned to the 25th - that he wrote Seitz that "I would like very much to have you as one of my battalion commanders". Seitz said he could arrange it if I wanted that division.

I did. I had served in it before, it was the 'Tropic Lightning' division out of the Pacific WWII, Korea, and Hawaii, worked with Australians and New Zealanders - while the famed 1st Division had always served in the European Theater and would attract

those who served there. I liked the 25th's lineage better.

So Gen Tillson arrived in Vietnam in March, I got there on the 1st of July.

But before I even had finished up my War College last requirement - help design with other classmates an academic "War Plan" assuming one against the Soviets - I started reading even more about Vietnam - the actual war we had - and that I predicted to the Secretary of Defense - the kind of wars we WOULD have. I especially read of the French Colonial experience, through the battle of Dien Ben Phu which they lost. I read the classic "Street Without Joy" and "Hell in a Very Small Place" by Bernard Fall who had been critiquing US Policy over Laos.

Even while I had ordered those books - about Vietnam, Bernard Fall was killed on February 21st, 1967 while reporting and observing with US Marines in Vietnam.

He was a great loss - one of the very few men who understood the Communists and their attempt to take over South Vietnam. He knew insurgency and counterinsurgency. While supporting the US intervention in South Vietnam, he was so critical of what and how we were doing it, he predicted failure. He was right.

I wrote a letter of condolence to his wife in the US, praising his work. I still have that letter and her nice response.

The Wolfhounds - Again

Vietnam War (1)

Category: Vietnam 1967-1968

Published: Saturday, 17 September 2011 12:58

Written by dave

Hits: 15723

I arrived at Bien Hoa airport on July 1st, went to the Replacement Battalion at Long Binh. At 4PM the 25th Division sent a helicopter to pick me up and fly me to Cu Chi, 20 miles northwest of Saigon, where General Tillson greeted me and spent 2 hours with me. He assigned me to command the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry. The Wolfhounds again!

I was thrilled. I wrote Patsy that that battalion was "The nastiest, toughest, dirtiest battalion in the whole Division with the best reputation and least 'garrison' personality. It lives in water waist-high and operates in Han Nghia Province. Name means 'little province'

Great. I was ready to go.

First, Tillson wanted me to spend 3 days with LTC Frank Goodnough's 1st Bn. 5th Mech Infantry (1/5) and fly out on an operation with LTC Ed Peters 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry 2/7 to familiarize myself with operations before assuming command of my 1/27.

I did, and as Peters with me aboard landed his Huey near his walking battalion, we landed right on top of 3 Viet Cong - which we promptly captured!

I wanted to see what the soldiers were going through. I quickly learned. Heat, swamps, bugs, fungus and hard work moving through the mud. Some men had not been in 'base camp' for over 30 days. While the Brigade and Division staffs slept in sheeted beds, showers, and ate at tables in mess halls in the Cu Chi 'base camp'. Only risking being hit by mortar fire when Viet Cong guerilla's got close enough to set up, fire, and run away. Or from occasional rockets.

I would be, as a lieutenant colonel battalion commander, sleeping under a poncho and maybe on a rubber air mattress when the 1/27 was on a mission.

Airmobile without being Air Cav

The 7th Cav Regiment - Custer's outfit - that I served and fought with in the Korean War had been foot infantry in the Pacific in WWII and in Korea. But by the early 1960s, the whole of the American Army effort in Vietnam had gone air mobile largely carried by Army Helicopters supported by Gun Ships and large Chinooks. The 1st Cav Division was stationed further north in mid Vietnam.

The 27th Infantry Wolfhounds - stationed in Cu Chi - north west and pretty close to Saigon - were supposed to be foot Infantry as they always had been since 1918. That made very little difference. By 1967 the All the Army had to do was assign separate Aviation companies, flying ubiquitous Huey helicopters which could carry 8 -10 Infantrymen each to the battlefield and back in support of Infantry battalions, further supported by Helicopter Gun-ships to deliver firepower from the air, add to it large support Chinook helicopters which could carry many more troops, but also supplies enough to support a Battalion - food, ammunition - in a relatively remote encampment, and voila! The Wolfhounds were just about as air mobile as the Air Cav.

But I just had to learn - as I had to in Korea - OJT (On the Job) and during combat rather than by air cav unit training in the US - how to fight the Vietcong, or the North Vietnamese regular troops (NVA) from the air.

Since the Vietnam War had already dragged on for 5 years, the

decision was made to 'rotate' everyone back to and from the US every year. So there was turnover of Battalion Commanders - a choice assignment for mid grade officer - every 6 months or so.

I was happy to get that command in competition with lots of other lieutenant colonels - there were just so many battalions to go around.

Obvious - to me - Flaws in the US Military Approach

But I knew several things from my previous 4 years studying Insurgent Wars, and how the US should fight them - tactically and strategically. One thing about the nature of 'asymmetric' warfare between conventional Armies and locally rooted insurgents was that the insurgents, fighting 'protracted' wars lasting decades, sometimes lifetimes, with guerilla units very rooted - even raised from - local people and populations, 'knew' everything about the people, as well as the terrain they fought from. While outsiders, like Americans in Army Battalions - Air mobile or on foot, not only didn't know the local languages they knew very little except from maps, and what could be seen from the air, about the politics on the ground. Those Americans who did, were usually 'Province Advisors' to local Vietnamese government forces, with a totally separate chain of command back to Saigon. Yet there was little direct coordination between those US Army advisors on the ground below, and a heliborne force above - unless in the wake of very well planned 'joint' operations.

And to make things worse - the US decided to 'turn over' the entire US Military personnel in Vietnam every 12 months. Rotation. While limiting commanders of Battalions to 6 months

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before being replaced. Believe it or not that latter policy was in order to train by combat experience - lieutenant colonel commanders - so that the Army would 'build up' a large enough corps of battle tested commanders for the REAL war (against, presumably the Soviets in Europe) we would have to fight.

Instead of tailoring personnel policies to the war we were fighting - a Communist Insurgency where North Vietnamese commanders had been at it for decades - we were partly in training for the war we didn't.

The contrast between the way the Colonialist British fought their successful Insurgent Wars in places like Malaya and Kenya was pronounced. Some of their officers spent their entire careers in the same local areas in places like India. And only took occasional trips back to England. They lived, with immediate family, there where they operated. Americans only 'sent' their Army to Vietnam for 1 year stands, and neither encouraged nor permitted their families to accompany them in country.

My Assigned Mission

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On a smoke-marked Landing Zone, trying to get oriented

Learning Curve - how to command from 1,500 feet up with 1:50,000 scale map, while turning in the air.

My mission was to conduct operations - sometimes in follow up to very specific intelligence about where suspected Viet Cong guerilla forces were, or where they were going. But also from

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just flying over a wide 'operational area' designated by the Regimental or Division commander as a kind of airborne 'patrol' - then striking any discovered enemy units in place or on the move. It was called 'Search and Destroy' - and being airmobile - as much by 'Combat Assault' from the air, as by attacking from the ground.

It was clear to me that the Airmobile commander in the Air above had no means or mission to try to 'win the hearts and minds' of Vietnamese below his flights. Sooner or later a vital task to change the minds of the Vietnamese caught between the terrorizing and propagandizing Viet Cong, the Vietnamese active Army forces on the ground, and the Heliborne Americans overhead. And the Vietnamese Army commander on the ground below, had very few advanced weapons with which to battle, and win, over guerilla forces which stood and fought - or sprung ambushes.

Had I been the Division Commander I would have put the US Army Advisors in each 'geographical operating area' assigned to an airmobile battalion, AND the Vietnamese Army and Police units under the direct command of the 25th Division airmobile battalion commander and charge that battalion commander to 'win the hearts and minds' of the people while trying to find, fix, and destroy the Viet Cong operating in the area.

But that would upset the entire Saigon 'MACV' to the lowest rank soldier on the ground organization for what was becoming essentially two wars - one against the armed guerillas and NVA - and one 'for' the hearts and minds of villagers. Violating one of the prime Principles of War - Unity of Command right down to the rice paddy level.

But I wasn't even the Regimental Commander (Colonel) so I was compelled to follow under the 'search and destroy' doctrine that Westmoreland had decreed was the order of the day and the conventional-war generals at Corps and Division level ordered it carried out.

This 'split' that in effect had us fighting two, and little coordinated, parallel wars, in the same area of operations, while the Viet Cong, for all their lack of military resources, tightly integrated their political and insurgent operations to pursue their goals.

Which is a large part of why we lost that war.

Learning Curve

So I had learn, as quickly as I could, how to command a de-facto Airmobile Infantry Battalion. My immediate predecessor was a Lt Col - promoted to Colonel named Fuller and made 2d Brigade commander.

He had, by all reports, been an outstanding Commander. He was now at the Field Force II level - a kind of 'Corps' Command in the G-3 Planning Office, under three star General Weyand.

On my way down to Cu Chi and my battalion, he asked me to see him in his office. He was very helpful in his advice, the most important one of which was his saying that he too had to learn how to operate Air Mobile - and that it would take me at least a month of almost daily air mobile search and destroy missions while I was in a command chopper, before I would master how to coordinate fire and maneuver from the air. He was right.

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He seemed to like me right off. He was not a West Point graduate, but came up through ROTC. He obviously knew my combat record from Korea. But he also, like any commander who moves on from having led 1,000, then 2,000 soldiers and officers at brigade level in combat, he wanted the best for 'his' men, and so wanted me to learn well.

I appreciated that. And six months later after I had served 'my battalion command tour' allotted to me, he requested I be assigned to his staff section at Field Force II Headquarters. Which is where I made as much contribution to the US war effort in Vietnam after the controversial Viet Cong TET offensive as I did commanding the 1st Wolfhound Battalion in successful Search and Destroy missions north west of Cu Chi the six months before.