

# **Operational Art in I Field Force, 1965 to 1967**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## **Abstract**

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I Field Force effectively conducted operational art from 1965 through 1967 under the leadership of LTG Stanley Larsen in the II Corps Tactical Zone (II CORPS). This accomplishment is all the more noteworthy considering LTG Larsen and his staff built I Field Force in 1965 and continued to receive most of the subordinate forces through 1966. The monograph outlines the effectiveness of LTG Larsen and his staff in conducting operational art in the central highlands in the early days of the Vietnam War. The monograph does not answer how or why the U.S. and her allies failed to save a competent South Vietnam; rather, this study demonstrates I Field Force effectively conducted operational art from 1965 to 1967 in aligning tactical tasks to achieve the strategic aims provided by MACV. I Field Force achieved success in the lines of operations against their enemy and towards the population. Although I Field Force succeeded along their lines of operation, their efforts in spreading this message were not as strong as possible.

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## Introduction

I Field Force effectively conducted operational art from 1965 through 1967 under the leadership of LTG Stanley Larsen in the II Corps Tactical Zone (II CORPS). This accomplishment is all the more noteworthy considering LTG Larsen and his staff built I Field Force in 1965 and continued to receive most of the subordinate forces through 1966. The following monograph will outline the effectiveness of LTG Larsen and his staff in conducting operational art in the central highlands in the early days of the Vietnam War. The monograph will not seek the answers to how or why the U.S. and her allies failed to save a competent South Vietnam; rather, this study seeks to demonstrate I Field Force effectively conducted operational art from 1965 to 1967 in aligning tactical tasks to achieve the strategic aims provided by Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).

The literature on Vietnam often seeks to explain the conflict from various perspectives. Often authors will zoom in on a unit, region, or person to attempt to represent the war through the story of a smaller slice of the pie. For example, *War Comes to Long An* describes the war in Long An province in Area III.<sup>1</sup> The interesting point of this work is the publication date of 1972. Stanton tells the story of the Vietnam Conflict through the units that fought in the war in *The Rise and Fall of an American Army* including action by both the Marines and Army to represent the conflict as the war progresses through the main engagements.<sup>2</sup> *The Anatomy of a Division* highlights the different missions the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division performed throughout the conflict and displays the development of the Airmobile concept used during the war.<sup>3</sup> Sheehan details the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Shelby L. Stanton, *The Anatomy of a Division, The 1st Cav in Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987).

efforts of a senior civilian, John Paul Vann, in directing operations to win the war within Vietnam in *A Bright Shining Lie*.<sup>4</sup>

The next general group of works on Vietnam explains why America fought and why America fought the way she did. General Westmoreland and Robert McNamara provide examples of this literature on the Vietnam War. These books generally remain at the strategic level and seek to explain the reasons for choosing the particular strategy or why the war was necessary and good. *A Soldier Reports*, written by General William Westmoreland provides an example of explaining the strategy.<sup>5</sup> *In Retrospect* by McNamara provides the descriptions and rationale behind the decisions the senior leadership made regarding the Vietnam conflict.<sup>6</sup> McNamara attempts to add context to many of the controversial decisions and representations that many have about the war.<sup>7</sup>

The third group attempts to prove why the United States lost the conflict. For example, in *On Strategy*, Summers examines the strategy of the United States and why failing to properly align strategy cost the U.S. the war despite the tactical efforts.<sup>8</sup> *The Army and Vietnam* by Krepinevich asserts the U.S. Army relied on the doctrine of WWII and failed to adapt to war outside of Europe.<sup>9</sup> Sorley provides another reason the U.S. failed in his work, *A Better War*.<sup>10</sup> Sorley argues Westmoreland's strategy was flawed and that General Abrams correct strategy was

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie, John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*. (New York: Dell, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. MacNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Random House, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> MacNamara, *In Retrospect*.

<sup>8</sup> Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War, The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, 1999).

applied too late to win the war. These three works each provide a better way to fight the war than the methods the U.S. decided to use.

Some authors seek to explain a portion of the conflict, often seen as controversial, such as Dale Andrade and John Shaw. Andrade's *Ashes to Ashes* describes the Phoenix program in the Vietnam Conflict.<sup>11</sup> *The Cambodian Campaign* by Shaw outlines the Cambodian Operation in 1970.<sup>12</sup> Shaw highlights an operation within Cambodia that is often only discussed through the political lens. His work looks at this period as a military operation rather than analyzing the political assessment for conducting operations within Cambodia.

Several authors have sought to explain the later portion of the war because they feel many authors focus on the early war and Tet offensive. Specter in *After Tet* writes about the nine months following the Tet offensive.<sup>13</sup> Specter highlights the relative disregard for this time despite the amount of U.S. casualties. Willbanks argues the process of Vietnamization contributed to the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 in *Abandoning Vietnam*.<sup>14</sup> His work begins with the Tet Offensive and works toward the fall of Saigon in 1975, concluding the War in Vietnam. These authors seek fill the void as many works focus on the early years through the Tet offensive.

The last category covering the war is the official history by the U.S. Army. The U.S. Army has recently released several books on the history of the Vietnam Conflict. *Taking the Offensive* by MacGarrigle looks at the Vietnam War from 1966 to 1967.<sup>15</sup> *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* by Cosmas is also produced by the United States

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<sup>11</sup> Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes, The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign, The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Ronald H. Specter, *After Tet, The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam, How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations, Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 1998).

Army.<sup>16</sup> Cosmas authored *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* for the U.S. Army as well.<sup>17</sup> These three works attempt to tell the story for the U.S. Army while remaining as objective as possible.

None of these works focuses on I Field Force nor on the period from 1965-1967. Additionally, many of these works focus on the entire conflict and remain at the strategic level. Very few authors choose to focus on the campaign level at the corps level or focus on a corps zone for a specific period. This monograph will focus on the operational art from I Field Force in II Corps zone from 1965 to 1967.

The study of a corps level headquarters and the effectiveness of their operational art is extremely valuable to the military professional seeking to understand the operational art. Additionally this study will provide valuable insight to current and future commanders, staffs, and planners seeking to achieve strategic ends in a complex environment. This study will not provide a blueprint for planners but possibly illustrate an evolution of the operational art over two years for a headquarters seeking to achieve the goals established by their higher headquarters.

The study is organized into four sections that attempt to demonstrate I Field Force displayed operational art under the command of LTG Larsen. The study will begin with an introduction that outlines the strategic context of the problem that I Field Force faced in Vietnam. The second portion outlines the planning efforts by I Field Force during the period. The third section discusses the execution of the operations within II Corps by I Field Force units and examines the results. The final section of the study provides the conclusions for the study. The conclusion will demonstrate that LTG Larsen and his I Field Force planners and staff were

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<sup>16</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 2007).

conducting operational art to arrange the tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve, in part, the desired end state from MACV and General Westmoreland in II Corps Zone.

## Strategic Context

Prior to the commitment of large, U.S. regular forces, the Government of South Vietnam pursued a military strategy with two components. Search and destroy operations conducted against enemy forces by larger units made up one half of the equation. The second, pacification or revolutionary development, consisted of smaller units conducting military operations against Viet Cong elements in the villages throughout South Vietnam. The government felt these efforts would be mutually supporting with the search and destroy separating the guerrillas and the main forces from the supplies and pacification feeding the search and destroy operations through the development of intelligence. The government felt this combined pressure would eventually force the defeat of the enemy forces, unfortunately, the enemy did not cooperate. Enemy forces began to defeat the regular ARVN forces repeatedly in the field, driving the ARVN back to a few key cities and in turn, undoing the little progress made on pacification of the towns throughout the south.<sup>18</sup> It became obvious South Vietnam would lose the war by 1964 following a series of battles between the north and south.<sup>19</sup>

With the commitment of regular troops to assist the South Vietnamese in their efforts, the U.S. planners wrestled with how to commit these troops. Should the troops conduct search and destroy or focus on pacification around the populace? Westmoreland envisioned an oil spot strategy, the territorial pacification course of action, in 1965 that saw the U.S. and allies securing an area and slowly expanding the oil spot.<sup>20</sup> By late 1965 he added attrition and subsequently he

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<sup>18</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 395-396.

<sup>19</sup> Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was Right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 2, (June 2008): 153-154, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592310802061349> (accessed October 11, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 397-398.

saw a slow wearing down of the enemy. Westmoreland “told Ambassador Lodge on 29 December 1965 that ‘unless we escalated to the point where all weapons available to us were used...I foresaw an extended war of attrition.’”<sup>21</sup> As a result of building forces over time and developing a staff and logistic structure at the same time through 1965 and into 1966, MACV fell in on the existing two component plan for the conduct of the conflict and passed these to their subordinate commands. Most forces did not arrive until 1966 and subsequently MACV allocated troops as they arrived and “MACV could do little at the beginning except rush American troops to the most threatened points.”<sup>22</sup> As troops arrived, support bases had to be built at the same time resulting in a delayed build in true combat power.<sup>23</sup>

The enemy reacted to the escalation of the conflict by the introduction of large U.S. troop commitments with increasing levels of troops.<sup>24</sup> “North Vietnamese and Viet Cong continued to expand their armed forces by increasing both infiltration from the north and recruiting in the south.”<sup>25</sup> The enemy would use guerrilla and main force units to defeat the south and her allies.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the enemy strategic leaders facing a strategy of attrition sought to meet and beat the U.S. at the same game.<sup>27</sup> Despite suffering a higher number of casualties, the NVA felt they could outlast the U.S. commitment of the conflict if both sides sustained casualties and the NVA and Viet Cong leadership were determined to remain on the strategic offensive.<sup>28</sup> The enemy and friendly strategic courses of action were on a collision course with both sides committed to not backing down.

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<sup>21</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 398.

<sup>22</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 397.

<sup>23</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962*, 397.

<sup>24</sup> Andrade, “Westmoreland was Right”, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 408.

<sup>26</sup> Andrade, “Westmoreland was Right”, 154.

<sup>27</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 408-410.

<sup>28</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 408-410.

Coinciding with a rapid buildup in 1965 to achieve the goals laid out by the president, General Westmoreland required a more robust command and control structure to account for the forces in Vietnam. General Westmoreland desired a headquarters built around an Army corps headquarters rather than designing a joint headquarters. He saw this adding flexibility and a quicker response time as this would avoid the pesky problem of inter-service politics. Westmoreland knew the headquarters would require liaison officers from the other services and saw this as a way to avoid the joint headquarters. The Joint Chiefs and the commander of Pacific Command were reluctant to approve this set up until it became clear Westmoreland intended to retain III MEF as a separate headquarters and equal headquarters to the one in question.<sup>29</sup>

General Westmoreland activated Task Force Alpha on August 1, 1965, and subsequently redesignated this headquarters as Field Force Vietnam on September 25, 1965.<sup>30</sup> General Westmoreland chose to use this term to indicate the support relationship between the U.S. forces and their ARVN counterparts rather than use an existing Army Corps Headquarters. He wanted to ensure that both parties knew this was the ARVN war with U.S. support.<sup>31</sup> The Field Force Vietnam headquarters was given operational control of the friendly forces within the II CORPS and was tasked to support the ARVN forces. Additionally, the Field Forces had command of the MACV advisory operations in the II CORPS. General Westmoreland placed responsibility for I CORPS on III MEF and intended to stand up another corps level headquarters over III CORPS in 1966. MG Larsen assumed command and due to seniority issues with the commander of the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, General Westmoreland placed Field Forces Vietnam in command of forces in II CORPS only.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. leadership explained to the ARVN Corps Commander the

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<sup>29</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 246-247.

<sup>30</sup> Cosmas, *MACV Escalation 1962-1967*, 247-248

<sup>31</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 201.

<sup>32</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 248.

relationship of the Field Force Command as his advisor as he initially saw this as a reduction in his rank and prestige.<sup>33</sup> Upon activation of the second corps level headquarters with responsibility in III CORPS, Field Forces Vietnam was redesignated I Field Force Vietnam and the second was designated II Field Force Vietnam.<sup>34</sup>

After the decision to develop a corps level headquarters, the actual task of building the headquarters remained. The Army decided to task III Corps with providing the basis of the I Field Force or TF Alfa (USTFA) as it was originally designated. Lieutenant General Stanley “Swede” Larsen led I Field Force from 1965 to 1967.<sup>35</sup> As the initial I Field Force commander, LTG Larsen faced several problems that would have to be overcome rapidly in order to provide the required operational control of a corps level headquarters. The headquarters needed people and liaison capability with the coalition units placed under its command. I Field Force developed a plan to utilize in country personnel to staff the headquarters to provide a better understanding of the conflict. The command requested personnel that had between four to eight months of time in Vietnam and sought to have a turnover rate of about 15% of personnel at any given time.<sup>36</sup> I Field Force placed liaison teams with the division from the Republic of Korea as well as the Korean Marine brigade under I Field Force.<sup>37</sup> This assisted the command in command and control operations with the Korean units.

The II Corps zone, commonly referred to as the Central Highlands, consisted of 12 provinces.<sup>38</sup> The zone shared a western border with Cambodia and the eastern border with the

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<sup>33</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 248.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 331.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley R. Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD513366, (Washington, D.C.: HQ., Department of the Army, 1967) pg. 1.

<sup>36</sup> I Field Force, Command Report, September 1965, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD390954, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1965), pg. 2.

<sup>37</sup> I Field Force, Command Report, September 1965, 3.

<sup>38</sup> MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations*, 64.

sea. I Corps was the northern border with Third Marines serving as the U.S. headquarters responsible for this zone. II Field Force commanded the III Corps tactical zone to the south, including the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon. II Corps was the largest core zone geographically, covering over 30,000 square miles.<sup>39</sup> II Corps represented 46% of the land mass.<sup>40</sup> The terrain varied wildly from the coastal region to the Cambodian border. A large mountain chain, the Annamite Mountains, created a difference in the weather pattern within the zone resulting in two monsoon seasons affecting the II CORPS.<sup>41</sup> Most of the population lived along the coast resulting in a poorly developed road network further inland toward Cambodia. II Corps contained 2.9 million Vietnamese representing 20% of the population of South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> Much of the western highlands was highly vegetated with up to triple canopy cover, providing excellent concealment for the enemy forces moving east from the Cambodian border.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the large mountains with plateaus were crisscrossed by large rivers and streams that could swell with water running off the higher elevations.<sup>44</sup> The mountains further hindered the natural development of the road and rail prior to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. However, the area contained numerous trails the enemy had created to move men and material through the area.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, Annex B-1.

<sup>40</sup> Stanley R. Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1, quoted in Bromley Smith, Memorandum from Bromley Smith to President Lyndon B. Johnson-General Larsen reports on two years of progress in II Corps, August 16, 1976, accessed online at [www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu](http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu) on October 8, 2012, reference number 0010133003.

<sup>41</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, Annex B-1.

<sup>42</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report by Lawrence J. Hickey, July 27, 1967, Operation Paul Revere/Sam Houston, HQ PACAF, found online at [www.DTIC.mil](http://www.DTIC.mil), reference number ADD702660, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Hickey, CHECO, vii.

<sup>45</sup> Hickey, CHECO, vii.

What was the enemy's strategic objective in relation to II Corps? Planners from both sides could easily see the strategic advantage the control of Highway 19, which ran east/west through II Corps to the port city of Qui Nhon, would give either side.<sup>46</sup> Should the NVA seize control of the highway and with it, drive a force through to the coast, the country of South Vietnam would be divided, isolating the northern portion of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>47</sup> The southern end of the Ho Chi Minh trail ending near the border along with the sparse population and heavy concealment from vegetation allowed the relatively unhindered flow of enemy into the Republic of South Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> The NVA used this plan in 1975 to defeat the ARVN by initiating their attack through the Central Highlands.<sup>49</sup> With this recognition upon deployment of U.S. Combat troops to Vietnam, a sleepy backwoods along the Cambodian border became strategically important to all parties concerned.<sup>50</sup>

The enemy within II Corps consisted of two primary types of organizations and fighters. The U.S. and ARVN forces were facing both the North Vietnamese Regular Army (NVA) as well as the Viet Cong communist guerrillas. Both of these forces presented distinct challenges to the U.S. command and its subordinate commanders. The NVA planned to split South Vietnam through the Central Highlands after moving down the eastern border of Cambodia and then massing around Saigon.<sup>51</sup> General Giap planned to split the southern nation through Plieku to An Khe to Qui Nhon by committing three NVA divisions. The anticipated timeline for this took the NVA through 1965 and 1966.<sup>52</sup> However, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division defeated a large NVA force in

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<sup>46</sup> Hickey, CHECO, viii.

<sup>47</sup> Hickey, CHECO, viii.

<sup>48</sup> Hickey, CHECO, vii-viii.

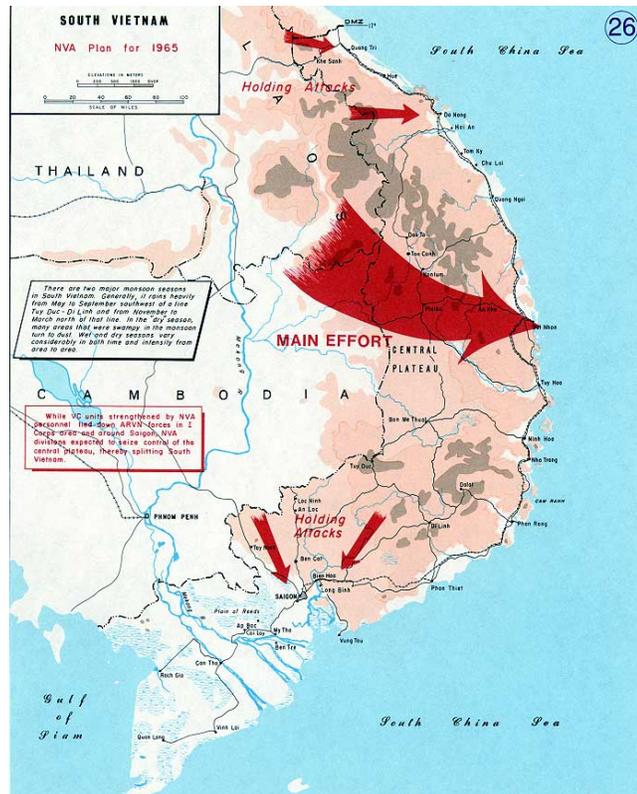
<sup>49</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 160.

<sup>50</sup> Hickey, CHECO, v.

<sup>51</sup> Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, (1984): 92, quoted in Harry Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982) 182.

<sup>52</sup> Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 182.

the Battle of the Ia Drang in November 1965.<sup>53</sup> This along with the rapid infusion of regular Army and Marine Units disrupted this initial plan by the North to force the surrender of the southern capital by surrounding Saigon similar to the French Defeat at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>54</sup>



Map depicting the North Vietnamese plan for 1965<sup>55</sup>

LTG Larsen and I Field Force faced a daunting challenge in 1965. The problem was complex and multi-faceted. I Field Force had to first build a corps level staff. Subsequently, I Field Force needed to develop an operational plan to defeat two different enemies in II Corps that combined to work against the U.S., ARVN, and coalition forces. Additionally, I Field Force needed to build up the ARVN ability while protecting the populace from the enemy and building a belief in the legitimacy of the ARVN forces. I Field Force did not have unlimited resources and

<sup>53</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 183.

<sup>54</sup> Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, (1984): 92, 180, quoted in Harry Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982) 182-183, 209.

<sup>55</sup> United States Military Academy, "NVA Plan for 1965", <http://www.usma.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/Vietnam%20War/vietnam%20war%20map%2026.jpg> (accessed October 11, 2012).

faced a constrained road and rail network, especially in the rural, mountainous west of II Corps. How would I Field Force defeat the enemy given the limits on resources and limited infrastructure while simultaneously protecting the populace? LTG Larsen and his staff would attempt to solve this problem for two years using of operational art.

## Planning

General Westmoreland and MACV designed a campaign plan that assigned the ARVN one mission and the U.S. and coalition partners another mission. The ARVN units were tasked with pacification within the built up areas.<sup>56</sup> In II Corps this meant the coastal regions as this was the area with the bulk of the population. The U.S. and coalition partners were tasked to destroy the enemy through an attrition based strategy.<sup>57</sup> The bulk of these missions would take place in the central highlands and along the borders within II Corps. It is important to note there would be overlap in these two distinct missions or strategies for both forces.<sup>58</sup> One reason U.S. strategists sought to minimize the pacification efforts by U.S. forces was to avoid losing the populace.<sup>59</sup> The U.S. leadership felt the Vietnamese could better identify the enemy within the population. Additionally, the U.S. leadership felt the U.S. forces were superior to the NVA and thus both the ARVNs and U.S. and coalition partners would be given missions they were ideally suited for.

General Westmoreland provided three phases for the ground war in Vietnam. I Field Force along with III MEF and II Field Force subsequently worked within this frame in their operations. Phase 1 consisted of commitment of troops through 1965 to stop the losing or stem the tide in the South. Phase 2 consisted taking the offensive with U.S. and allied forces to destroy the enemy forces and restart pacification programs in the first half of 1966 and Phase 3, if the

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<sup>56</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 186-188.

<sup>57</sup> MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations*, 7-8.

<sup>58</sup> MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 401.

enemy persisted, consisted of defeating the enemy by destroying the enemy forces and bases for the next year to year and a half.<sup>60</sup> I Field Force under General Larsen conducted the first phase of General Westmoreland's campaign plan by building forces through the end of 1965, including their own headquarters, and then transitioned into the second phase to destroy the enemy forces and bases within II Corps.<sup>61</sup>

MACV campaign planning improved from 1965 to 1967 as a result of several factors. The first factor aiding in the development of campaign plans revolved around the flow of troops into Vietnam. As more troops became available, MACV was able to develop a plan that resembled the modern plan with lines of effort. In the first year of the build up as previously stated MACV sent U.S. and allied troops to known hotbeds of enemy violence in an effort to slow the tide of the enemy forces. As the forces steadily built into 1966, MACV began to develop a campaign plan that was produced in 1966 for execution in 1967.<sup>62</sup> Prior to this, I Field Force along with the other corps level headquarters conducted their planning from a variety of sources.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Westmoreland primarily provided the strategic guidance to these headquarters because the MACV planners knew the situation in each corps was unique and this prohibited theater wide operational planning. The MACV planners and commander provided the corps planners with strategic guidance and forces and allowed each corps headquarters to conduct operational art.<sup>64</sup>

The MACV campaign plan for 1967, completed in 1966, provided the mission statement: "The mission of RVNAF and US/FWMAF is to defeat the VC/NVA forces and extend GVN

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<sup>60</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 183.

<sup>61</sup> I Field Force, Command Report, September 1965, 1.

<sup>62</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 1967, accessed online at [www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu](http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu) on OCT 08, 2012, reference number 0240514020.

<sup>63</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 397-398.

<sup>64</sup> Cosmas, *MACV, Escalation 1962-1967*, 397-398.

control throughout the Republic of Vietnam...”<sup>65</sup> This campaign plan provided two objectives as well as several subordinate tasks for each objective. These read as follows:<sup>66</sup>

- 1) To defeat VC/NVA forces. The related tasks are:
  - a.* Conduct sustained, coordinated, unilateral or combined offensive operations against VC/NVA forces and base areas.
  - b.* Conduct a continuous harassing and destructive air offensive against enemy forces and base areas.
  - c.* Interdict VC/NVA land and water LOC’s through ground, sea, and air operations.
  - d.* Conduct psychological operations against VC/NVA personnel and civilians under the influence of the Viet Cong.
  - e.* Conduct intelligence, counterintelligence, border surveillance, cross border as authorized, and counter infiltration operations.
- 2) To extend GVN control in the Republic of Vietnam. The related tasks are:
  - a.* Establish, maintain, and secure military installations and supporting LOC’s as necessary in RVN.
  - b.* Secure the major political, economic, and food producing and populated centers.
  - c.* Identify and eliminate the VC guerrilla and communist infrastructure.
  - d.* Conduct military clearing and securing operations to establish and maintain local security for areas undergoing Revolutionary Development.
  - e.* Conduct military civic action to win the support of the people to the GVN.
  - f.* Provide relief, reorientation, rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees.<sup>67</sup>

The combined campaign plan for 1967 was the first plan to provide both U.S. and allied force and ARVN forces with combined guidance.<sup>68</sup> Prior to this, the U.S. commands received guidance separately from their Vietnamese counterparts.

The MACV campaign plan stated overlap would exist between ARVN and U.S. and allied forces with the ARVN focusing on revolutionary development and U.S. and allied forces focusing on destroying the NVA and Viet Cong forces.<sup>69</sup> Despite these focus areas, both would support each other and in turn, these two objectives would support each other. The planners saw the people as the center of gravity as stated in: “The people are the greatest asset to the enemy

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<sup>65</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 1

<sup>66</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 1-2.

<sup>68</sup> Small Wars Journal, “Handbook for Military Support of Pacification”, 1968. [www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/militarysupporthandbook.pdf](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/militarysupporthandbook.pdf) (accessed on September 16, 2012), 5.

<sup>69</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 6.

and control of the people is the enemy's goal."<sup>70</sup> By destroying the NVA and Viet Cong, the pacification (revolutionary development) would be supported and by denying the enemy access to the people and developing intelligence through these same people, the job of destroying the NVA and Viet Cong would become easier.<sup>71</sup>

How did LTG Larsen interpret these strategic goals? LTG Larsen saw as his primary mission to seek out and destroy the hardcore enemy and he recognized this mission as enemy focused and not terrain or population focused.<sup>72</sup> This led to his operational approach. LTG Larsen saw his mission as to first destroy the NVA and Viet Cong in his area and this in turn would secure the populace rather than to first secure the populace and subsequently destroy the enemy.

One of the first elements of a plan, and arguably one of the most important, planners seek to understand in conducting planning is the future desired state or the end state of the plan. ADRP 3-0 stresses the importance of accurately describing the end state and conditions in the following selection: "Since every operation focuses on a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable end state, success hinges on accurately describing those conditions. These conditions form the basis for decisions that ensure operations progress consistently towards a desired end state."<sup>73</sup> Failing to accurately describe the end state can induce risk to mission accomplishment. Often, the higher headquarters will provide a subordinate headquarters the desired end state. MACV provided I Field Force the end state in their campaign plan: a defeated NVA and Viet Cong and extended government control within South Vietnam within II Corps.<sup>74</sup> How did I Field Force

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<sup>70</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 6.

<sup>71</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 1.

<sup>73</sup> United States, Department of the Army, *ADRP 5.0, The Operations Process*, (Washington, D.C.: HQ, Dept of the Army, May 2012), pg. 2-8.

<sup>74</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 1-2.

seek to achieve this desired end state? I Field Force developed several lines of operations to achieve the end state and these will be examined next.

I Field Force lines of operation morphed over time. In August 1965, the I Field Force mission fell into two lines. The first line consisted of securing the bases the units fell in on as the U.S. forces arrived in South Vietnam and the second line of operation consisted of conducting offensive operations in support of ARVN throughout II Corps.<sup>75</sup> By October 1966, I Field Force units operated under four lines: 1) Direct Attack on Enemy Forces, 2) Secure the Population by supporting Revolutionary Development 3) Open Roads and Rail lines, and 4) Partner with the ARVN, although ARVN Partnership was not specifically listed as a line of operation in the campaign plan.<sup>76</sup> The I Field Force commander decided to put the bulk of his U.S. and allied combat power along the direct operations against the enemy line of effort. Of the 68 U.S., Korean, and ARVN battalions, I Field Force allocated 28 to supporting revolutionary development by April 1967.<sup>77</sup> I Field Force saw these lines as reinforcing each other to achieve the desired end state in II Corps. I Field Forces sought to add stability to areas through combat operations against the enemy forces to enable the revolutionary development to occur in and around the population centers in provinces.<sup>78</sup>

The lines of operation can be divided into decisive, supporting, and sustaining operations. The I Field Force plan saw the decisive operations aimed at defeating the enemy forces.<sup>79</sup> The pacification or revolutionary development support and the ARVN partnership were supporting operations. As the population became more secure and the ARVN became more capable, U.S.

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<sup>75</sup> I Field Force, Command Report, September 1965, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD390954, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Department of the Army), pg. 5.

<sup>76</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD390953, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Department of the Army), pg. 14.

<sup>77</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, pg. 14.

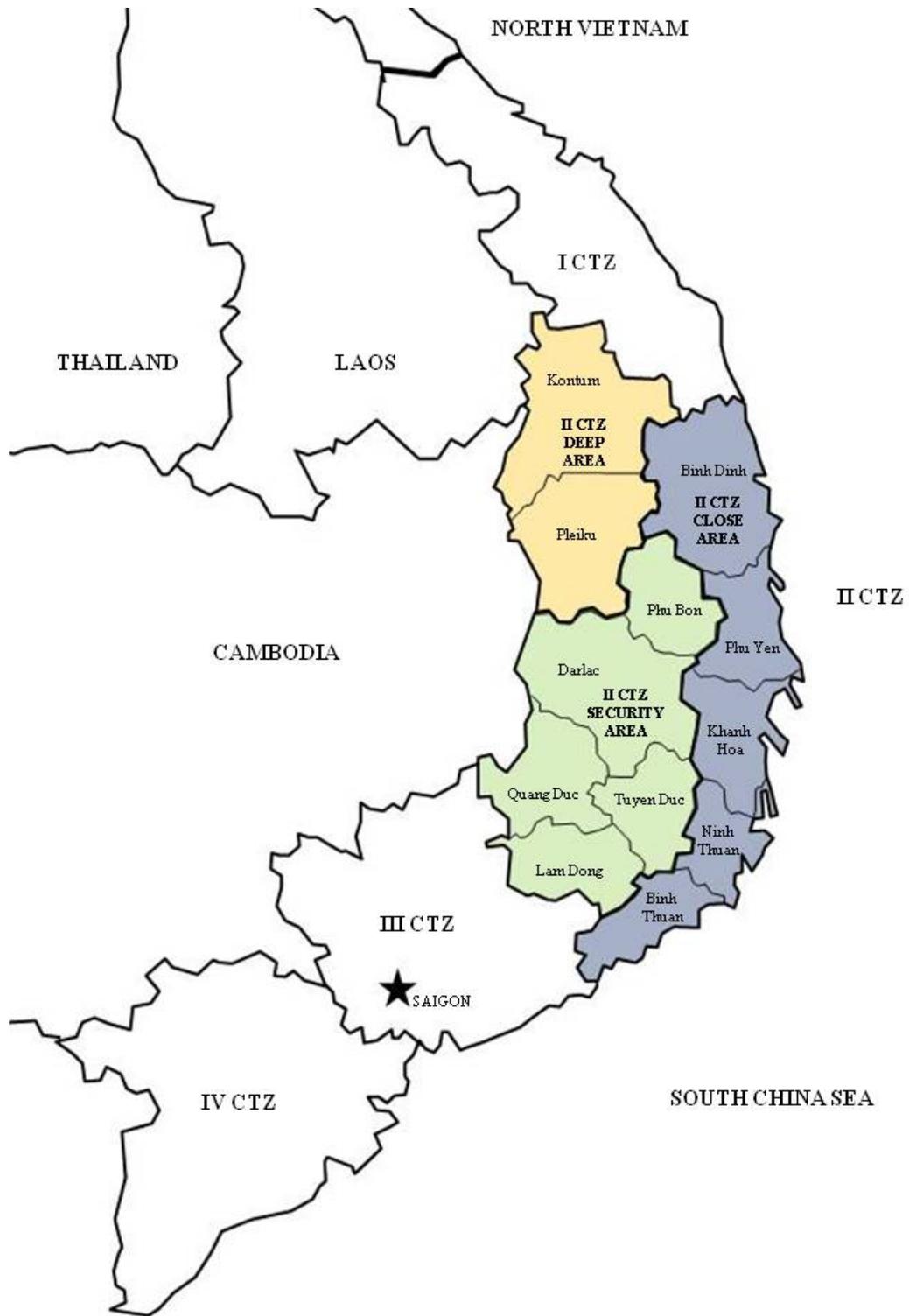
<sup>78</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, pg. 14.

<sup>79</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 5.

forces could begin to transition of handing the war over to the ARVN forces. The operations conducted against the enemy main forces bought the time for development in both revolutionary development and the ARVN.<sup>80</sup> The sustaining operations would further enable the decisive and supporting operations. The I Field Force plans further saw the opening of rail and road lines and the opening of bases as sustaining operations to achieve success in South Vietnam. Through sustaining the forces during the operations, these sustainment efforts would provide forces the capability to sustain the tempo required to operate over the difficult and varied terrain.

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<sup>80</sup> BDM Corporation, A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume VI, Conduct of the War, Book 1 Operational Analysis, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD 096429, (McLean Virginia: BDM, 1980), pg. 3-83.



Map depicting II Corp with Deep, Close, and Security Areas<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Map Compiled from data from MacGarrigue, *Combat Operations*, II.

With MACV's guidance and the density of population along the coast, I Field Force broke down II Corps Zone with the provinces along the coast in the close area and the two provinces of Kontum and Pleiku in the highlands as the deep area.<sup>82</sup> The remaining five provinces made up the security area.<sup>83</sup> The close area included the critical province of Binh Dinh, designated a high priority province by MACV and due to the population density and port city of Qui Nhon was a prime target of the NVA and Viet Cong.<sup>84</sup> Kontum and Pleiku, rural, mountainous zones remained the entry point into II Corps from Laos and Cambodia by NVA men and material. I Field Force sought to disrupt the NVA in the deep area to shape the close fight around the populace. I Field Force planners knew the firepower and mobility would benefit the American forces best in the deep and security area rather than attempt to slug out battles in the more populated coastal regions.<sup>85</sup> However, losing the close area to the Viet Cong and NVA would lose the fight for II Corps. The MACV Campaign plan stated this clearly:

focus those areas where operations will destroy or drive the enemy into sparsely populated and food scarce areas; insure the protection of the population, control the resources and provide unrestricted use of major lines of communication, all of which will facilitate follow on Revolutionary Development. Spoiling attacks to frustrate the VC strategy will continue to be conducted in other areas.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> United States, Department of the Army, *ADRP 1-02, Operational Terms and Military Symbols*, accessed online at [http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/ADRP\\_1.html](http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/ADRP_1.html), (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Dept. of the Army, 2012), 1-7, 1-11, 1-33.

<sup>83</sup> United States, Department of the Army, *ADRP 1-02, Operational Terms and Military Symbols*, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Dept. of the Army, 2012) 1-7, 1-11, 1-33. Close, deep, and security areas are defined for contiguous areas; however, in the case of Vietnam, these areas overlapped due to the nature of the fight and enemy in relation to the population and friendly forces. Close Area is "that area assigned to a maneuver force that extends from its subordinates' rear boundaries to its own forward boundary." Deep area is defined to include "an area forward of the close area that a commander uses to shape enemy forces before they are encountered or engaged in the close area." The security area is defined to include the area in which security forces "furnish information on the enemy and delay, deceive, and disrupt the enemy."

<sup>84</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 15.

<sup>85</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 188.

<sup>86</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 7.

By fighting the large NVA formations in the rural areas along the borders and defeating the enemy forces in the close area with the ARVN, U.S. and other allied forces, I Field Force could protect the important coastal regions and support the pacification of the populace in II Corps.

The ideal area to disrupt the enemy formations for I Field Force would have been the enemy base areas in Cambodia and Laos; however, due to political constraints this was not acceptable during LTG Larsen's command. I Field Force could not conduct deep operations in Cambodia and Laos and therefore moved the deep area to the provinces of Kontum and Pleiku. Benefitting I Field Force in their efforts to disrupt the men and material from flowing unabated into II Corps through Laos and Cambodia were the efforts by the commanders of Pacific Command and MACV in targeting the enemy formations through air power.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, these efforts could only slow the enemy down and could not prevent the enemy from basing from Cambodia and Laos.

I Field Force knew they could not cover II Corps with their troops. They did not have enough troops to be everywhere at the same time. However, the planners knew they could use synchronization of efforts to provide a sustained cumulative effect on their enemy. I Field Force directed their subordinate commanders to conduct sustained operations in areas for up to 120 days in the areas along the border with Laos and Cambodia. The planners sought to provide sustained support to revolutionary development in these areas during these operations. Rather than conduct a short operation to attack a suspected enemy force, the planners saw value in longer operations to attack the enemy and drive the enemy from an area to begin to build the governance in with the population. Through conducting operations for up to 120 days then shifting to another location and conducting another similar operation, the planners believed they could maintain sustained

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<sup>87</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 96.

pressure on the enemy, while maintaining the growth of governance within the towns in II Corps.<sup>88</sup>

I Field Force leadership determined the enemy center of gravity to be the NVA forces within II Corps. I Field Force leadership determined the best method to defeat the enemy center of gravity to be the defeat of the NVA first, through direct action, followed by the Viet Cong through pacification operations. LTG Larsen stated: “Go after the NVA and VC hard core first. Only after they are defeated, or rendered ineffective, can we begin true pacification.”<sup>89</sup> The leadership realized the security of the people, was the friendly center of gravity. The MACV campaign plan stated: “The people are the greatest asset to the enemy and control of the people is the enemy’s goal.”<sup>90</sup> I Field Force knew to protect the friendly center of gravity required the elimination or neutralization of the enemy center of gravity, the NVA, and sought to achieve this through the operations of I Field Force and their ARVN counterparts. I Field Force realized they did not have the capability to directly eliminate the enemy center of gravity in one single action. I Field Force would attack their enemy indirectly. They would succeed by wearing down the enemy center of gravity by targeting vulnerabilities until the enemy culminated and the friendly mission was successful.<sup>91</sup>

To protect the friendly center of gravity, I Field Force allocated 28 battalions towards pacification efforts in 1966.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, I Field Force remained very cognizant of minimizing civilian casualties realizing this would lose support in the long run and these civilians were why

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<sup>88</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

<sup>89</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, Annex B-5.

<sup>90</sup> MACV, Campaign Plan, 6.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, JP-5-0, *Joint Operations Process*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 2011) III-26.

<sup>92</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

the U.S. forces were in Vietnam.<sup>93</sup> I Field Forces approached the security of the friendly center of gravity through defeat of the enemy military forces. I Field Force knew this approach favored the capabilities of the friendly forces (mobility and firepower) and separated the enemy from the friendly center of gravity. By fighting in the rural areas, the damage to the population would be minimized as much as possible.

Given the enemy and friendly disposition and the terrain, the I Field Force could not locate a decisive point in relation to the terrain. However, the decisive point of tipping the battle towards the friendly cause and away from the enemy would come in the central highlands. I Field Force identified the NVA as the center of gravity, as previously mentioned, and the infiltration routes along the Cambodian and Laos borders into Vietnam came through the central highlands. Therefore, the fight would be won or lost in the central highlands by the U.S. while primarily ARVN units with some U.S. and Korean units protected the population, fought the Viet Cong, and worked towards pacification. This makes sense from an operational perspective as Clausewitz stated the priority is to conduct operations that cause the most suffering to the enemy in an effort to make the war more costly for the enemy.<sup>94</sup> I Field Force would concentrate the combat operations against the NVA in the central highlands in an effort to inflict the most damage on the enemy center of gravity. Additionally this protected the population from the fighting and separated the population and enemy forces.<sup>95</sup>

Related to culmination, operational reach remained a key planning concern for the I Field Force as they sought to plan operations to achieve their goals. I Field Force created OPLAN 43-66, Operation ROAD RUNNER, in an effort to clear as many primary and lateral roads as

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<sup>93</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD390955, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Department of the Army), pg 42.

<sup>94</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pg. 93.

<sup>95</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 188.

possible within II Corps because planners saw the increase in operational reach through clearing more routes in zone.<sup>96</sup> This operation involved all forces in II Corps (U.S./ROK/ARVN) to conduct route clearance to progressively add control of the road network to the South Vietnamese Government.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, the planners sought to use the mobility provided by the helicopter to greatly increase the operational reach of the units under their command.<sup>98</sup> The enemy was forced to move by wheel and foot. The I Field Force would use the new airmobile concept to outmaneuver their adversary on the battlefield. The planners additionally used the helicopter lift to move artillery assets into position to provide fire support for operations in the highlands when roads would not support the operation.<sup>99</sup> However, I Field Force did have limited operational reach, especially regarding Cambodia. Cambodia provided an area outside the operational reach of the I Field Force due to political not technological or physical reasons. I Field Force planners knew their operational reach was greater within II Corps than that of their adversary but their adversary had the advantage once across the Cambodian border.

As Clausewitz stated the entire reason for the soldier “is simply that he should fight at the right place and the right time.”<sup>100</sup> I Field Force sought to fulfill this requirement by extending their basing within II Corps to allow the superior mobility of the helicopter and mechanized troops to become an advantage and not a hindrance due to range limitations of both vehicles and men. For example, in August of 1966, I Field Force conducted a series of meetings to determine the best arrangement of bases to support the arriving 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>101</sup> Careful consideration went into these plans to ensure the bases could be secured with as minimal a force

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<sup>96</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 13.

<sup>97</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 13.

<sup>98</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 9-14.

<sup>99</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 15.

<sup>100</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 95.

<sup>101</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

as required to ensure the remainder of the troops could support combat operations. As the improvement of the lines of communication and resupply maintained a line of operation for I Field Force, a part of this line of operation included building operating bases to allow troops to rest and refit as well as point for the establishment of artillery positions for indirect fire support. Additionally, these forward bases allowed the positioning of helicopter and support units for the line troops. These basing efforts revolved around the age old military issue of placing the soldiers in the right place at the right time. Without an unlimited supply of troops, I Field Force planned their bases to ensure the maximum flexibility within the II Corps.<sup>102</sup>

I Field Force planners sought to force culmination in their enemy. The first and most direct approach chosen was to seek out and destroy the enemy soldiers. The I Field Force sought to kill enemy soldiers at a rate higher than the North Vietnamese could replace these soldiers in the field.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, through sustained operations (lasting 120 days) in areas, I Field Force sought to separate the enemy from the civilian population to conduct revolutionary development free of enemy contact and to prevent extortion and recruitment by the enemy.<sup>104</sup> The second method the I Field Force used to push their enemy to culminate took the form of eliminating the enemy's supplies. The leadership realized rice was a staple of the diet of the enemy and by eliminating this resource; the enemy would be pushed closer to culmination. I Field Force sought to destroy enemy crops and bring the civilian population's rice under government control.<sup>105</sup> I Field Force units planned crop destruction in enemy controlled agricultural areas.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, I Field Force bought rice from civilians to store in government warehouses and

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<sup>102</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 6.

<sup>104</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

<sup>105</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 18-27.

<sup>106</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 18-19.

allocated units to protecting rice areas.<sup>107</sup> Finally I Field Force units moved rice for the civilian population in I Field Force trucks.<sup>108</sup> This would curtail the extortion of both men and material for their continued war efforts. Through sustained efforts to cease border infiltration, gain and maintain control over the rice production, and separate the enemy from the population of South Vietnam, I Field Force leadership continuously sought to force culmination upon their adversaries: the NVA and Viet Cong within II Corps.

LTG Larsen described Cambodia as “This sanctuary for a large NVA force is the biggest single challenge in all of II Corps.”<sup>109</sup> I Field Force leadership identified Cambodia as a thorn in the side of the allied cause. The Cambodian border allowed the enemy to retreat across to safety once contact was made with U.S. or allied forces. Efforts by I Field Force to overcome this challenge resided in the operations conducted to interdict the supplies moved across the borders with Laos and Cambodia into II Corps.<sup>110</sup> I Field Force planned numerous operations to interdict NVA and Viet Cong units and supplies along the border.<sup>111</sup> Despite the challenge of a border sanctuary, I Field Force plans sought to force enemy culmination through sustained interdiction and pacification operations.

I Field Force planners recognized the need to prevent culmination within their own units as well. I Field Force conducted operations aimed at improving the supply and lines of communication within II Corps. These operations progressed along a route or road building effort and another effort in improving the aerial resupply system through airfield improvement.<sup>112</sup> I Field Force intended these roads to serve as an artery, lessening the requirements to use air lift

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<sup>107</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 41.

<sup>108</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 21.

<sup>109</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 4.

<sup>110</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 12.

<sup>111</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, January 1967, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD390962, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Department of the Army), pg. 9-13.

<sup>112</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 24-39.

to move supplies, freeing the airlift to move troops for combat operations.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, the land lines of communication would not be dependent upon the weather conditions as much as the air lines of communication. Road network improvements increased the security of certain areas enabling the rapid repositioning of security forces.<sup>114</sup> Road network improvement provided a simultaneous and reinforcing benefit by enabling the civilian populace to travel and conduct economic activities.<sup>115</sup>

I Field Force additionally spent considerable effort into improving the II Corps lines of communications by building landing strips for airplanes such as the C-130.<sup>116</sup> This would allow a greater throughput of men and material as the C-130 could carry 30,000 pounds, increasing the efficiency.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, this would free the rotary wing aircraft for assault missions and support of assault troops within II Corps, especially on the missions where a fixed wing aircraft could not land due to terrain. I Field Force saw the value in improving their own lines of communication and supply in order to stave off culmination due to weather or enemy action and in assisting in bringing the roads back into support of the population and government.

I Field Force sought to maintain tempo in an effort to force culmination on their enemy and sustain the initiative. I Field Force planners considered the resources available and the enemy and terrain as they determined the best method to maintain tempo. Another factor the planners would need to overcome remained the elusiveness the enemy routinely demonstrated throughout Vietnam. The NVA and Viet Cong would break contact and slip across the borders or melt back into the villages once the friendly forces engaged the enemy and it became apparent the enemy was losing the battle. The search and destroy operation became the operation of choice to

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<sup>113</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 24-26.

<sup>114</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, January 1967, 58.

<sup>115</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 26.

<sup>116</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 26.

<sup>117</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 39.

maintain the tempo, especially in the highlands of II Corps. I Field Force planned operations with one or more units searching and the remainder of forces held in reserve with helicopter support to react once the enemy forces were located and fixed. Many of these operations lasted for one to three months in an effort to maintain the tempo and keep the enemy off balance. I Field Force sought to sustain operations in the field to prevent the enemy from regaining the initiative within II Corps. Again, Cambodia proved to be a planning consideration that I Field Force would have to work around. The I Field Force would have to plan operations that maintained tempo without allowing the enemy forces to slip back into Cambodia and regain the initiative or at the very least prevent the U.S./allies from retaining the initiative. LTG Larsen and I Field Force realized the importance of maintaining the appropriate tempo to retain the initiative without giving the enemy the opportunity to dictate the tempo within II Corps.<sup>118</sup>

Like any other commander, LTG Larsen realized the forces and resources available were not unlimited and therefore he must assume some risk within his area of responsibility. LTG Larsen along with I Field Force chose to assume risk within the coastal populated areas. This may seem counterintuitive since I Field Force identified the population as the center of gravity for friendly forces; however, this is not the case. I Field Force chose to attack the enemy center of gravity, the NVA forces in order to protect the friendly center of gravity. Additionally, I Field Force chose to use U.S. forces along with allies to attack the NVA while the ARVN forces (primary) and the U.S. and allies (secondary) conducted pacification along the coastline in the heavily populated areas.<sup>119</sup> I Field Forces did not completely abandon the population as they allocated 28 of 68 battalions to pacification efforts in 1966.<sup>120</sup> This mitigated the hazard of the remaining Viet Cong by allowing the ARVN's to secure their own population centers from the

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<sup>118</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

<sup>119</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

<sup>120</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 14.

Viet Cong and maximized the available fire power and enablers against the more capable NVA forces.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, the ARVN soldiers would be better equipped through the language and culture to work within the population when compared to the Americans and other allies.<sup>122</sup> This hazard and mitigation did provide I Field Force an opportunity to attack the enemy center of gravity, the NVA forces, while simultaneously attacking the Viet Cong through pacification. I Field Force chose to exploit this while allowing the ARVN to continue to develop as they protected the friendly center of gravity. I Field Force applied analysis to determine the course of action in relation to the hazard, mitigation, and opportunity they faced.

## **Execution & Results**

At the conclusion of LTG Larsen's tour as I Field Force commander the war was not over, nor would it end for eight more years. This does not mean that I Field Force failed from 1965-1967; however, it does bear closer examination into the performance of I Field Force in achieving an end state following two years of combat in II Corps. Every major battle in II Corps had gone to I Field Force and the ARVNs. The enemy appeared to be on the ropes as General Palmer stated: "They [U.S. & Allies] had won every encounter. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces were unable to overcome the firepower and mobility edge possessed by the Americans. By late 1967, Allied Forces were near the peak of their strength while the communists were staggering noticeably, especially after their recent maulings."<sup>123</sup> I Field Force had achieved a measure of success in II Corps as LTG Larsen's end of tour report to the President stated there

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<sup>121</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 186-188.

<sup>122</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 186-188.

<sup>123</sup> Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, (1984): 228, quoted in Harry Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982) pg. 210.

was definite progress towards achieving the end state and concludes with: "I can say that today there is an air of refreshing optimism in the II Corps area."<sup>124</sup>

I Field Force displayed success in their developed lines of operation. Their direct operations against the NVA and Viet Cong displayed an overwhelming advantage to the allies. The infamous body count statistic displayed a lopsided advantage to the U.S. and her allies despite the enemy's ability to seek shelter in the border sanctuaries. The estimated enemy killed during this period reached 7000 and the American losses reached 800.<sup>125</sup> Perhaps LTG Larsen provides a better indicator: "The number of successful enemy attacks of battalion size or larger in II CTZ has been zero."<sup>126</sup>

I Field Force made strides forward in securing the population through the support of revolutionary development as well. The population within II Corps saw a marked increase in the amount of the population under the security of allied troops within the two years under LTG Larsen. I Field Force saw an increase in the range of 40% more of the population secured from 1965 to 1967.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, the effectiveness of U.S. and allied troops in fighting the NVA and Viet Cong units began to have a synergistic effect, especially when coupled with the development of the road and rail network.

The ARVN counterparts to I Field Force did improve in II Corps; however, the level of improvement is debatable. At the conclusion of the two year period, I Field Force worked with two ARVN divisions and a separate regiment of the ARVN employed in II Corps.<sup>128</sup> These units

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<sup>124</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

<sup>126</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, Annex B-5.

<sup>127</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

provided the U.S. forces the capability to concentrate U.S. and other allies on defeating the NVA, reinforcing the effects of the pacification and advisory efforts. One example is the 23<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Division, consisting of two regiments, covering an area larger than either III Corps or I Corps.<sup>129</sup> This economy of force allowed the I Field Force to use the remainder of the friendly forces to continue to pressure the NVA and Viet Cong throughout the zone. As the ARVN units became more capable, more combat power became available to defeat the Viet Cong forces and to further the pacification efforts. The combat operations and advisory operations achieved a synergistic effect by reinforcing each other and the remaining lines of operation for I Field Force.

Several authors might dispute the I Field Force claims the ARVN improved enough over the two years. The after action reviews from I Field Force focus primarily on the U.S. operations and highlight a willingness to commit U.S. forces in the big battles. Thayer pointed out the serious efforts to improve the ARVN across South Vietnam did not begin in earnest until 1969.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, much of the data indicates the U.S. units sought to do most of the fighting, which is understandable since many of the combat multipliers such as air power were U.S. forces.<sup>131</sup> This in the long run may have proved to be the final fatal blow for the ARVN. Once the U.S. left, the ARVN were incapable of standing on their own without the support of the U.S. forces, especially U.S. combat multipliers.<sup>132</sup> However, as General Westmoreland stated, the most immediate danger to the safety of the South Vietnamese was the large enemy units threatening to destroy the country.<sup>133</sup> It is not inconceivable the U.S. were correct in focusing on U.S. combat operations at the risk of under developing the Vietnamese.

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<sup>129</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

<sup>130</sup> Thayer, *War without Fronts*, 75.

<sup>131</sup> Thayer, *War without Fronts*, 57.

<sup>132</sup> Sorely, *A Better War*, 373.

<sup>133</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 187-189.

The improvement of the lines of communication and supply within I Field Force retained importance for LTG Larsen as a line of operation despite the lack of attention from the outside world. I Field Force after action reviews specifically mentioned the early road networks as a hindrance to operations with II Corps.<sup>134</sup> I Field Force sought to improve the roads and rails to sustain their own operations and improve the quality of life for the population, supporting the growth of governance. The improved routes allowed the increased trade within the I Field Force area of operations.<sup>135</sup> Security, closely linked with an improvement in economics for the population as well as the resupply of friendly forces, improved steadily over the two years as well. This is not to say the area remained an enemy free zone; however, the increase in mobility from improved roads, coupled with an increase in ARVN units, meant the ability to increase the pacification efforts and improve the security within II Corps as well. I Field Force steadily increased the pacification, security, and improvement of lines of communication and resupply over the two year period, improving the overall conditions in II Corps and working towards the strategic goals within the Republic of Vietnam.

I Field Force and their subordinate commands sought to defeat the NVA forces in order to isolate the Viet Cong forces and force their subsequent defeat. After action reports indicate the strength of this logic. The subordinate commanders outline the results of this strategy. For example, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division reported their success in dismantling the Viet Cong network as a result of operations to drive the NVA from the sector: “The significant lack of North Vietnamese Army contact during portions of this period afforded commanders of U.S. Forces the opportunity to commit forces to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure for the first time.”<sup>136</sup> The

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<sup>134</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 24.

<sup>135</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 27.

<sup>136</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Task Force, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Operational Report Lessons Learned, June 1967, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD391485, (Washington, D.C.:HQ., Department of the Army, 1967), pg. 33.

command follows up this observation with the recommendation the U.S. forces should concentrate on overt activities and allow the ARVN to concentrate on the collection of information on the Viet Cong. This reinforces the concept of focusing the U.S. efforts and strengths against the enemy's center of gravity. I Field Force additionally allocated U.S. units to isolating the II Corps from NVA units crossing into Vietnam from the West. After action reviews indicate the subordinate U.S. unit's focus on preventing the NVA from moving freely into II Corps. The subsequent near annihilation of the Viet Cong in the Tet offensive in 1968 further strengthen the I Field Force argument the NVA regulars were the center of gravity. Following the Tet Offensive, the war continued despite the decimation of the Viet Cong guerrillas by the allied forces in South Vietnam.<sup>137</sup> The Viet Cong provided the North Vietnamese an economy of force mission in the South.<sup>138</sup> I Field Force correctly identified the NVA as the center of gravity for the enemy and correctly targeted the NVA with the U.S. forces.

Once I Field Force determined the NVA were the COG and subsequently to defeat the NVA first, they set about determining a decisive point or points to defeat the NVA. I Field Force realized, similar to MACV, that the decisive point would not be a geographic point, rather a point that the NVA knew they could no longer replace the killed Viet Cong or NVA with soldiers at a rate that exceeded the amount the North was losing fighting the Americans.<sup>139</sup> The initiation of the Tet offensive in 1968, a move by the North, was an attempt to defeat the U.S. military as the North perceived they were not achieving their goals through their current strategy.<sup>140</sup> The North could not maintain the fight with a net loss of soldiers over an extended period. In II Corps alone,

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<sup>137</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 178.

<sup>138</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 184.

<sup>139</sup> Andrade, *Westmoreland was Right*, 163.

<sup>140</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 407-409.

LTG Larsen reported the enemy killed in action at 7000 for the two year period.<sup>141</sup> Although these numbers may be dubious to some, the point is not the exact body count; rather, the North initiating an attack in an effort to achieve a decisive victory for fear of failure to sustain the fight is the point. The U.S. and her allies were winning the war of attrition against their enemy by targeting the NVA and killing more of the enemy than the enemy could replace.<sup>142</sup> The North was feeling the war where it hurt the most.<sup>143</sup>

I Field Force conducted the first two phases of MACV's campaign plan in conducting the troop buildup through 1965 and 1966. I Field Force transitioned into the second phase for most of 1966 conducting operations to destroy the NVA units operating in II Corps zone. The reality of troop flows meant that the two phases ran concurrently with the units first arriving into theater beginning operations against enemy forces as follow forces continued to close into Vietnam.

I Field Force conducted transitions within II Corps by using multiple units to apply pressure on the enemy. For example, Operation PAUL REVERE I began in 10 May 1966 with 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and elements of 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division departed to execute another operation and subsequently PAUL REVERE II, III, and IV ran through 31 December 1966. At the conclusion of these operations, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division began Operation SAM HOUSTON from 01 January 1967 to 05 April 1967 in an effort to maintain pressure on the enemy forces in the central highlands.<sup>144</sup> The ability to transition forces from offense to defense to rest and refit operations within the II Corps provided the friendly forces with the capability to operate against the enemy for extended duration without

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<sup>141</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

<sup>142</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 6.

<sup>143</sup> Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right", 161

<sup>144</sup> Hickey, CHECO, iii-iv.

forcing the individual soldiers to maintain the efforts. This produced an accumulation on the enemy while preserving the friendly forces for future operations.

As discussed, operational reach within South Vietnam and II Corps provided an advantage to the I Field Force. The helicopter and the constant improvements to the lines of communication and supply by I Field Force enabled the commander to seek to control the initiative through controlling tempo of the operations. LTG Larsen sought to use his superior firepower and mobility to extend his reach throughout his sector and succeeded. The enemy was hamstrung by the long supply lines and the inability to mass without becoming a target for the waiting U.S. firepower to rain down on the engaged forces. LTG Larsen realized the enemy could produce another fighter from the North, but he also knew this took time and the operational reach of the NVA was limited in II Corps to entry through the central highlands. Without the ability to disrupt the supply lines through direct action into Cambodia, I Field Force sought to reduce the operational reach of the enemy to the areas closest to the borders and further from the population. I Field Force in this regard succeeded.

However, I Field Force, along with MACV, struggled in disrupting the NVA at the operational and strategic level due to limitations on operations within Cambodia and Laos. Later in the conflict, MACV authorized action into these areas to disrupt the operational reach of the NVA, unfortunately however, this did not occur for I Field Force in 1965-1967.<sup>145</sup> The ability to mass combat power in Cambodia prior to conducting operations in South Vietnam proved critical to the operational reach of the NVA. I Field Force and the NVA would fight in South Vietnam, rather than in Cambodia and Laos and this in the long run favored the NVA. Despite the ability to control the tempo and provide operational reach throughout South Vietnam, I Field Force could not project power into Cambodia and truly break the operational reach of the NVA.<sup>146</sup> This

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<sup>145</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 201.

<sup>146</sup> Thayer, *War without Fronts*, 91.

prolonged the war, stalled the efforts to achieve a lasting peace in South Vietnam, and provided an area the NVA could recover from the repeated blows inflicted by the I Field Force from fighting in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, I Field Force had no such sanctuary to return to after the fighting.

I Field Force continued to improve their logistical basing. LTG Larsen sought to expand the rail, road, and air network and had done so throughout his two years in command of I Field Force. I Field Force improved the rail system with 365 km or 53 % of the rail lines working.<sup>147</sup> The improvement of the airfields continued with 79 airfields with 41 C-130 capable airfields, 60 capable of handling C-123s, and the remainder C-7A capable.<sup>148</sup> Additionally the road network grew to 1650 km of operational roads or 90 % by late 1967.<sup>149</sup> These roads were operational and secure with minimal protection. These roads demonstrated a marked increase in the security within II corps zone as these roads required a major operation to open to conduct any follow on operations when I Field Force began their campaign. This improvement in the road network greatly increased the operational mobility of I Field Force units, especially when compared with their enemy. The NVA moved supplies overland, under threat of air interdiction, down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Then the NVA infiltrated these into the South across the border from the border sanctuaries. This logistical supply route required enormous man hours to move supplies south to maintain the war effort. Conversely, the U.S. and her allies were able to reposition men and material through air, rail, and road movement in the central highlands. Additionally, the allies were able to do so without fear of air interdiction. These bases provided an enormous advantage to the sustainment and mobility of the I Field Force and coalition partners.

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<sup>147</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

<sup>148</sup> William Westmoreland, General Westmoreland's Military Assessment for July, August 1967, accessed online at [virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu](http://virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu) on October 8, 2012, reference number 0240714005, pg. 6.

<sup>149</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1-2.

However, these base camps did have their detractors. The idea of the lavish life style of large base camps compared to the life on the line for the average service member did cause some anger to the public back home.<sup>150</sup> Additionally, this tied up men in the defense and construction of these base camps that could be used to fight.<sup>151</sup> As Palmer stated: “Too many men were wasted on non-essential tasks...making the Vietnam War one of the least efficient in our history.”<sup>152</sup> Additionally, LTG Peers, successor to LTG Larsen, complained many of the airfields were poorly constructed and more importantly were not used, creating a wasted use of resources and manpower.<sup>153</sup> While some of this maybe warranted, I Field Force determined the usefulness of these bases especially in staving off culmination in their own forces while maintaining the pressure on the enemy.

Ultimately I Field Force struggled to force the NVA to culminate within II Corps. I Field Force applied pressure but never closed the border sanctuaries, thereby allowing the NVA to slip back across the border. These border sanctuaries allowed the NVA to refit and seek a more opportune time to strike I Field Force. The South Vietnamese leadership understood the importance of sealing off the borders of South Vietnam from NVA infiltration as early as 1965.<sup>154</sup> Unfortunately the political situation forced the recognition of the border by the I Field Force, as well as the remainder of the allies, and this hamstrung the allied efforts to force a true culmination on the NVA at anything other than a tactical level.

I Field Force efforts to free the South Vietnamese from the constant threat of NVA and Viet Cong from taking supplies and men demonstrated success. In the two years under LTG

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<sup>150</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 219.

<sup>151</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 219.

<sup>152</sup> Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, (New York: Ballantine, 1984), pg. 198.

<sup>153</sup> W.R. Peers, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1969, accessed online at [www.dtic.mil](http://www.dtic.mil), reference number AD502432, (Washington, D.C.: HQ., Department of the Army, 1969), pg. 16.

<sup>154</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 227.

Larsen, I Field Force managed to bring nearly 95% of the rice land under the control of the South Vietnamese Government, where the Viet Cong had previously controlled nearly 70%.<sup>155</sup> Additionally, the military controlled about one half of the population and the enemy the remainder in 1965, this increased to 89% of the population by July, 1967.<sup>156</sup> Enemy prisoners of war from the coastal areas indicated the: “the food is scarce, sickness a problem, and morale is low” resulting from the enemy attempting to resupply troops furthest from the Cambodia and Laos borders.<sup>157</sup> The enemy prisoners of war from the areas closest to the border were “well equipped, well fed, and in good physical condition.”<sup>158</sup> I Field Force efforts to separate the enemy from the population indicate an overall effectiveness of the I Field Force efforts.

The allies performed admirably accounting for the sanctuaries and the ability of the NVA to choose the place and time of many fights. I Field Force inflicted heavy losses on the NVA for the two years under LTG Larsen. These losses forced the NVA to push replacements south along the Ho Chi Minh trail to maintain the efforts in the South. I Field Force were depleting the Viet Cong faster than they could be locally recruited. I Field Force estimated that for every 1500 Viet Cong lost by mid 1967; the Viet Cong could only raise about 500 locally.<sup>159</sup> “The input from in country recruitment is falling off because of a reduction of population under Viet Cong control, increasing casualties sustained and disaffection resulting from the hardships and low survival probability inherent in a protracted war of attrition” is how General Westmoreland described the

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<sup>155</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

<sup>157</sup> Westmoreland, General Westmoreland’s Military Assessment for July, August 1967, 5.

<sup>158</sup> Westmoreland, General Westmoreland’s Military Assessment for July, August 1967, 7.

<sup>159</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

issues the NVA and Viet Cong had in attempting to fill the holes created in the enemy forces.<sup>160</sup> The difference in enemy forces in numbers lost compared to recruitment numbers came from the NVA in the form of individual replacements infiltrating from the north.<sup>161</sup> The general improvement within II Corps each month indicated I Field Force made it difficult for the NVA to replace these losses at the same rate they enemy was losing them.<sup>162</sup> Had I Field Force been able to attack the border sanctuaries to disrupt the NVA forces, the enemy in II Corps may well have been defeated prior to 1967. As previously mentioned, the NVA were on the decline in II Corps at the close of 1967 and the Tet offensive virtually wiped out the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Given the political difficulties facing the U.S. and her allies, I Field Force performed admirably in their efforts to force culmination on the NVA and Viet Cong.

I Field Force saw tempo as an aid to force culmination on the enemy. By sustaining pressure on the enemy through the use of speed relative to the enemy in their operations, I Field Force could seize the initiative from an enemy that sought to choose the time and place of battle. Because the NVA and Viet Cong could break contact and move back into the villages or the border sanctuaries, the enemy could choose battles that initially favor them over the U.S. and her allies. However, once I Field Force units located the enemy, rapid repositioning of friendly forces allowed the allies to regain the initiative and force a higher tempo on the enemy. The helicopter became the primary method for repositioning U.S. and allied troops. I Field Force utilized the helicopter to move troops and supplies to maintain the tempo of U.S. troops and force the enemy to sustain fighting against a foe with superior mobility and firepower. The U.S. used

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<sup>160</sup> Westmoreland, General Westmoreland's Military Assessment for July, August 1967, 15.

<sup>161</sup> Westmoreland, General Westmoreland's Military Assessment for July, August 1967, 15.

<sup>162</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 2.

mobility to mass at the critical points of a fight and then at the conclusion to disperse to avoid becoming a larger target.<sup>163</sup>

Additionally, LTG Larsen favored longer operations by units once the unit was committed to an operation. The commander and staff realized the soldiers could maintain a pressure on the enemy while maintaining a rhythm as an operation progressed. LTG Larsen stated: “We have learned by experience that units can and should be committed to ops on a sustained basis. Long term employment offers two significant advantages: more mileage is gotten out of the units without any ill effects, and it is easier to win the allegiance of the populace when it is assured of longer term presence of strong friendly forces in the area.”<sup>164</sup> Larsen recognized the inertia that comes from operations. Mounting a large operation is similar to running a long race, as hard as it may be to keep putting each foot in front of the other, the runner that stops understands it is much harder to restart once a break is taken. LTG Larsen recognized the similar tendency in his troops and favored longer operations to capitalize on the inertia of the operation to continue and push the enemy closer to culmination. LTG Larsen recognized pushing tempo on the enemy enabled his operations to succeed and placed the enemy in a disadvantageous position.

Unfortunately, the U.S. troops were not always able to destroy the enemy units once engaged in a battle. The enemy possessed superior mobility in the terrain in at least one regard. The enemy could routinely break contact from U.S. troops as the U.S. troops waited for superior firepower to finish the destruction of enemy forces rather than utilizing maneuver to complete the destruction of the enemy.<sup>165</sup> This allowed enemy forces to retreat across the border or in the case of the Viet Cong, to melt back into the population. Despite the advantages provided the enemy

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<sup>163</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 183.

<sup>164</sup> Larsen, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, 1967, 3-4.

<sup>165</sup> Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 183.

with the border sanctuaries near the central highlands, the I Field Force successfully recognized tempo as a method to increase pressure on the enemy, rest the initiative from the enemy and attempt to force culmination in the enemy.

The risk I Field Force assumed in concentrating on the NVA and using the ARVN to protect the population appeared to pay off for the U.S. As previously stated, the NVA saw a decline in their ability to support the troops in the coastal/populated regions and were forced to spend more energy to push men and material down from the North. In 1967, I Field Force felt their approach to the risk was justified. Additionally, I Field Force felt this operational approach maximized U.S. combat power and reduced the larger risk of alienating the population by conducting operations among the larger population. The U.S. commanders felt the ARVN could better identify the enemy in the population and therefore the risk to friendly operations was greater in the U.S. troops conducted operations in and around the bulk of the population. The U.S. commanders felt the risk involved in a U.S. in the central highlands and the ARVN in the population was a better option than the U.S. in the population and the ARVN in the rural west.

## **Conclusion**

*Everything worked, but nothing worked enough<sup>166</sup>*

I Field Force effectively conducted operations in an effort to pursue the strategic goals they were provided by General Westmoreland. I Field Force sought to achieve the strategic goals through conducting operations along four lines of operation: defeating the enemy forces, securing the population through support of revolutionary development, building roads and rails, and building the ARVN. I Field Force performed admirably in these tasks; however, room for improvement remained.

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<sup>166</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 200.

Defeating the enemy forces through search and destroy supported the first and decisive line of operation within I Field Force's area of responsibility. General Westmoreland and subsequently LTG Larsen saw the NVA and Viet Cong forces as the immediate threat to the defeat of the allied cause. However, the border sanctuary continued to plague I Field Force in their attempts to bring the enemy to a decisive battle or to a culminating point by breaking the enemy system's ability to regenerate combat power. Additionally, the NVA continued to choose when to fight and when to run. Despite these setbacks, the NVA and Viet Cong did not win any battlefield victories and the U.S. and her allies were able to shift from focusing on main unit combat operations to pacification following the Tet offensive. The results of two years of hard work by I Field Force units in seeking engagement with enemy forces began to show in II Corps.

The population security in 1967 compared to 1965 demonstrated a remarkable increase. Most of the population (89%) and rice production (95%) in II Corps were secured under South Vietnam and U.S. forces.<sup>167</sup> With the separation of the main forces of enemy from the population, the revolutionary development programs were able to make steady progress, although, not as far as many hoped. The steady progress completed in the security of the population would be overlooked once the Tet offensive occurred the following year; however, I Field Force had increased the security throughout the zone in the two years.

The steady improvement in the quality of the roads and rails demonstrated the continued efforts to provide security and improve the quality of life within the corps zone. I Field Force demonstrated an understanding of the synergistic effect of improving the routes within II zone. This allowed for the further enhancements in operations and in the economy and security of the populace, further strengthening the first two lines of effort.

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<sup>167</sup> Larsen, Informal Statistical Progress Report on II Corps Tactical Zone, Vietnam, from 1965 to July 1967, 1.

The final line of operation, building the ARVN, was the area with the greatest opportunity for improvement by I Field Force. I Field Force did conduct operations with the ARVN and used ARVN units to conduct operations; however, the efforts to improve the ARVN appear to be less proportionate when compared with the remaining lines of operation. I Field Force after action reviews provide cursory coverage of the ARVN development and any operations conducted toward this line. I Field Force did conduct operations with the ARVN and used the ARVN in economy of force roles; however, the after action reviews indicate a willingness on the American planners to push the ARVN aside and allow the U.S. forces to conduct the operations. This may have been easier in the short term but ultimately may have proven short sighted once the U.S. departed Vietnam.

One area the I Field Force commander and staff could improve was the outreach with the U.S. population and international audience. I Field Force did not control the strategic setting but they did control their message or attempts to spread their message. Although I Field Force tracked the outreach to the press, their after action reports indicate a lack of coordinated strategic communications plan.<sup>168</sup> I Field Force tracked the number of press visits, made numerous efforts to move the media to the troops, and provided a set of 20 questions and answers the troops were likely to be asked.<sup>169</sup> I Field Force seemed to gain an appreciation of the use of media as their operations progressed indicated in the initiation of a I Field Force publication “Typhoon” in late 1966.<sup>170</sup> A strengthened information operation or campaign earlier to highlight the I Field Force narrative may have gone a long way to assisting the U.S. military’s cause at home in the U.S. and abroad. The media was going to tell a story, why not tell I Field Force’s story? I Field Force

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<sup>168</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 32-33; I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, October 1966, 58-60, I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, January 1967, 62-64.

<sup>169</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lessons Learned, April 1966, 205.

<sup>170</sup> I Field Force, Operational Report Lesson Learned, January 1967, 62-64.

should have harnessed the power of the media early in the fight to tell the story to the troops, the Vietnamese, and the rest of the world building upon their battle success.

The final point that these lessons offer is the similarity between the fight that I Field Force found in Vietnam and the current and future environment for the U.S. military. The U.S. will likely see conflicts that produce hybrid warfare and occur in very complex environments. Enemies will seek to exploit the gaps between policy and strategy. Operational planners should seek to understand the political limitations and in these maximize their operations effectiveness. This is the challenge of the modern military professional, to align tactical actions through time and space to achieve the strategic goals in a complex, highly evolving environment.

## Appendix

The following definitions will provide the reader with a better understanding of several key terms that this study build upon:

**Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV):** Headquarters that commanded the U.S. Military forces in Vietnam. This command grew out of Military Assistance and Advisory Group.<sup>171</sup>

**I Field Force:** A corps level headquarters partnered with the Army of Republic of Vietnam II Corps command in Area II. This command was designated a field forces to ensure the U.S. commanders and Vietnamese understood the relationship was a supporting relationship, not a command relationship between the U.S. Commander and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>172</sup>

**Area II:** One of four corps zones in South Vietnam. Area II consisted of the 12 central provinces. This area was largely unpopulated and commonly referred to as the central highland.<sup>173</sup>

**Operational Art:** The pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.<sup>174</sup>

**Tactics:** The employment of units in combat. It includes the ordered arrangement and maneuver of units in relation to each other, the terrain, and the enemy in order to translate potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002).

<sup>172</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 201

<sup>173</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 70-71.

<sup>174</sup> United States, Department of the Army, ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Dept. of the Army, 2011), 9.

<sup>175</sup> United States, Department of the Army, FM 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, (Washington, D.C.: HQ. Dept. of the Army, 2004), 1-183.

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