

THE STRANGE WAR THE U.S. IS NOT WINNING

EYEWITNESS REPORT FROM THE FRONT IN VIETNAM

It's a dirty, vicious war that Americans are caught up in in the swamps of South Vietnam. Men forget about the politics of Saigon when they stand gun to gun with the Communist guerillas. Robert P. Martin, of the staff of "U.S. News & World Report," here takes you into the field with his eyewitness account of the fighting.

GOCONG, South Vietnam

It is not in the political capital of Saigon, but out here in the Mekong River Delta that you find the real nature of South Vietnam's war for survival against the Communists—a war in which Americans are deeply committed.

This is not only a strange sort of undeclared war, the most difficult and frustrating type to fight. It is also a war that the U. S. is not yet winning—and that could still be lost.

The Americans are, by definition, spectators rather than participants. Yet they are intimately involved in practically every engagement fought by the Vietnamese Regulars in the Delta.

Take the Delta Aviation Battalion, a U. S. outfit, as an example. Since July 4 it has flown more than 10,000 sorties in 6,000 flying hours, carrying about 22,000 troops and more than 500 tons of cargo across hostile territory.

Whenever there is trouble in the Delta, minor task forces of top American experts from Saigon reach the battle area before the shooting is over. Their job is to find out what is happening in an engagement, pinpoint mistakes and make a continuing judgment of Communist capabilities and intentions.

Where guerrillas roam. The Delta is a lowland stretching as far as the eye can see and creased by a spiderweb of waterways. Mangrove swamps and vast areas where the reeds grow higher than a man's head make it a paradise for guerrilla tactics.

This is a land of ceaseless conflict, of stealthy night raids and occasionally of pitched battles that involve bombers, artillery and armored vehicles on the Government's side, and Communists fighting frantically on the other.

The Communists have controlled much of the area for years. People pay taxes to the Communist Viet Cong. Their children attend Viet Cong schools. There is hardly a family that has not contributed one or more recruits to the Communist guerrilla forces. It is not easy to break the Communist hold here.

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In the seesaw war that has been going on for years, each side has had its victories and its defeats.

Late on a September afternoon I stood on the shoulder of a narrow road just outside Gocong, a village not far from the South China Sea. Across the water-filled rice paddies, plumes of smoke and showers of debris marked the targets of the Vietnamese Army's artillery. An American-piloted B-26 made repeated passes over a banana grove where guerrillas were dug in.

This was the end of the engagement. On one side of the road the bodies of five Communist guerrillas sprawled in death. On the other side, a young Vietnamese soldier cradled his rifle in his lap while he stroked the head of his dead buddy.

A few yards away was the burned-out hulk of an American armored amphibious carrier and, to one side of it, the bodies of 17 more dead Communists. The road was lined with U.S. Army trucks and fighting vehicles, but the only movement was of a woman carrying off a pig killed in the battle.

Fighting had started at midnight, when 200 hard-core Communists, reinforced by a company of local guerrillas, hit three Government outposts near Gocong.

The guerrillas failed to penetrate the outpost defenses, and withdrew at dawn to set up an ambush for the Vietnamese rescue party that was sure to follow the attack. But they underestimated both the size and speed of the rescue operation. By midmorning the area was swarming with Vietnamese troops. The Viet Cong guerrillas were caught in the open paddy fields.

Fight to death. The Communists fought back furiously. One guerrilla commander was still shooting and giving orders when an armored personnel carrier rolled over him. By the end of the day, 80 Communist dead had been counted.

Only a few miles away, another fight was going on. This time a Vietnamese force had blundered into a Communist ambush. A call for help went out, but liaison between the trapped unit, the Army and the provincial chief broke down. Nobody responded in time to rescue the ambushed party.

"If you don't have instantaneous response you get clobbered," was the laconic comment of a senior U.S. adviser.

The same night, the Communists carried out a series of co-ordinated attacks in strength. The target area was the extreme southern tip of Vietnam, where the Government has a number of lightly defended outposts.

The Communists opened up by firing 40 mortar shells at the Soctrang airfield,

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where an American-piloted helicopter unit is based. The mortar barrage fell short. Then the Reds blew up a key highway with land mines, and put a small hamlet under harassing fire.

These were diversionary attacks. While they were under way, the main Communist assault was launched at two villages—Dam Doi and Cai Nuoc. The Viet Cong quickly overran the defenses at both villages. At Dam Doi, the guerrillas killed 30 defenders, including a district chief, and 10 civilians. At Cai Nuoc, 40 defenders and 10 civilians were killed and 13 wounded.

The Vietnamese quickly got revenge at Dam Doi. U. S. helicopters ferried a battalion of Vietnamese marines to the village. The guerrillas had no time to disperse, and were caught in a fire fight lasting all afternoon. The marines killed at least 120 guerrillas. Marine casualties were 12 dead, 26 wounded.

The marines captured a fantastic array of guerrilla weapons—submachine guns and automatic rifles, a cache of mortars, a Chinese-made machine gun, old-model French land mines, boxes of hand grenades and small-arms ammunition. Also in the loot was an American 75-millimeter recoilless rifle, a weapon that has never been issued here. It was probably captured during the Korean War and sent here later by the Chinese Communists.

It was a different story at Cai Nuoc. A battalion of Vietnamese paratroopers arrived late in the afternoon. But by the time they were on the ground, ready to fight, the Communists had vanished into the countryside.

Veteran officers say the difference, as usual, was in the speed of the Government's response. The marines hit the Communists fast and hard at Dam Doi, and the guerrillas took a real beating. The response at Cai Nuoc was delayed, and the guerrillas got away.

Changing: war's tide. Here in the Delta, there has been a sharp change in the character of the war in the past four months.

Earlier this year, most of the Americans serving in the Delta thought they could "see daylight" ahead. The fighting was vicious. The war was not being won, but neither was it being lost. And most Americans believed that a solid base for successful operations was being prepared.

Lately, however, Communist activity has shown a significant increase. The guerrillas are more aggressive than ever before. They have displayed a surprising ability to group small

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units quickly into battle-size operations.

New Communist weapons — Soviet, Chinese and Czechoslovak models—are appearing on the battlefields. U. S. armored amphibious vehicles all show the marks of having been hit by fire from recoilless rifles and heavy automatic weapons. There is not a single helicopter in the Delta that hasn't been hit by ground fire. The guerrilla infantrymen carry a new Soviet carbine, equipped with bayonet for close-in combat.

In addition, the Communists, on the average, are capturing three weapons from the Vietnamese armed forces for every two they lose in battle.

Casualty gap closing. Known Communist casualties still are heavier than losses by the Vietnamese forces. But the Government's favorable ratio of dead, wounded and missing is declining.

In the first half of 1962, Viet Cong losses were at the rate of two men to every one on the Government side. When U. S. support was rising to its peak in the second half of last year, the ratio rose to 3 to 1. But in the first six months of this year the guerrillas narrowed the margin—losing seven to every five Government casualties.

Over-all Communist casualties in the Delta during the past 18 months are estimated at 27,000, compared with known Government losses of slightly more than 12,000. Yet, this does seem to be an intolerable drain on Viet Cong. The Communists seem have no trouble recruiting fighting bearers and agents to replace losses. And hard-core leaders come from Communist North Vietnam whenever replacements are needed.

New worry from Saigon. Now there is new worry in the Delta, born of events in Saigon.

The American troops are doing their jobs calmly and with obvious professional skill. American fighting men are not yet directly affected by the Buddhist crisis in Saigon or by the U. S. attempt to force changes on the South Vietnamese Government.

Yet, everywhere, there is an uneasy feeling about the future.

It arises from worry that bitterness between the American and Vietnamese political leaders will gradually seep down to the provinces and eventually reach the combat level.

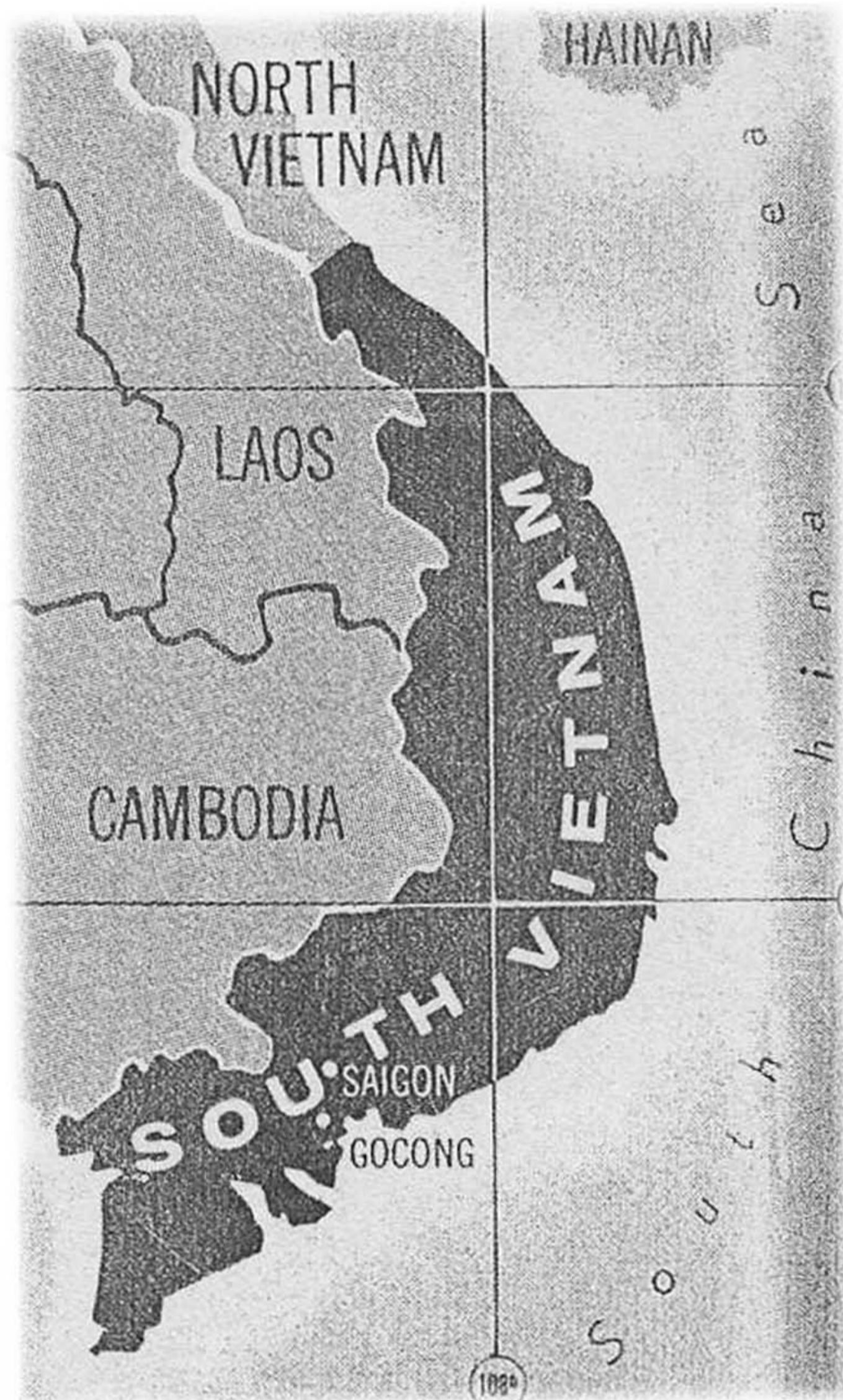
This is a sensitive political war. That is why, when the Saigon Government ordered countrywide martial law during its crackdown on Buddhists, the Vietnamese military commanders in the Delta refused to impose a curfew. They reasoned this way:

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Vietnamese peasants might interpret a curfew as a sign of Government weakness rather than strength. And the peasants—sitting on the fence in a war they detest because their homes are being blown to bits and their families wiped out—will throw their support the side they think will win.

The Vietnamese Army could not last more than a few months, at the most, without U. S. supplies and a U. S. air force. The American officers in Saigon and in the field are trying to hold the Army together, to keep it fighting and retain the confidence of Vietnamese military commanders while the U. S. and Vietnamese Governments try to settle their political differences.

But everyone realizes that if the conflict between the two Governments continues, the infection from it will, sooner or later, seep into the countryside. And the countryside is where this war is going to be won—or lost.



Mekong River Delta, below Saigon, is the cockpit in Communist hit-and-run war of harassment in South Vietnam.