



## USA tactics- what were they? Why were they ineffective?

The USA initially entered Vietnam expecting a conventional/ traditional war like in Korea; *however* they had trained and equipped for the wrong type of war.

Their uniforms and helmets were heavy in the hot and humid climate.

They took high technology equipment such as tanks or M16 rifles that often jammed in the wet, that were unsuited to the surroundings.

The USA's initial tactics were to simply attack their enemy head on, but they were soon suffering heavy defeats – they were forced to change their approach.

**'Hearts and minds'**- The USA's first change in approach was operation 'Hearts and Minds'.

This aimed to reward the South Vietnamese population who were loyal to the USA – effectively bribery.

- US money was spent on building schools and medical centres in the villages.
- Local democracy was encouraged to show the locals that the American political system was best – villagers could vote on how money was spent.

This tactic had some success in South Vietnamese towns and cities, but was less successful in the smaller villages where the locals were more interested in the idea of gaining their own land under communism. The Vietcong were local people, same religion, same language and explained the aims of communism.

- The US also showed that they failed to understand Vietnamese culture which affected their popularity. (acting like an occupying army, failing to learn the language, clouded by the aim of the Policy of Containment)

## Operation Rolling Thunder

Began in 1965 and was an attempt to bomb North Vietnam into defeat – US General Curtis Lemay promised to **'Bomb North Vietnam into the stone age'**. 3 times the amount of bombs in WW2 were dropped at a cost of \$900 million.

It was supposed to be a 3 week campaign but lasted 3 ½ years.

The US used its mighty B52 bombers, each capable of carrying a massive 27,000 kg bomb load. They bombed North Vietnam from high altitude, in an attempt to destroy airfields, bridges, docks and supply routes such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

It was also supposed to weaken the morale of the North Vietnamese.

**However** much of the bombing was inaccurate.

Any damage was quickly repaired by the North Vietnamese where 400,000 part-time workers volunteered to repair the damage. Often, the Ho Chi Minh trail was missed as there were dummy routes and much was covered by the dense jungle.

The VC also started to shoot down US aircraft with anti-aircraft guns and surface to air missiles provided by China – 367 US planes shot down in 1967.

In 1968 Operation Rolling Thunder was judged to have failed in its original objectives and was called off. \$300million of damage was caused against a **cost to the US of \$900million**.



## Vietcong tactics- What were they? Why were they effective?

When the USA first entered Vietnam they mistakenly thought that the **National Liberation Front (NLF)** usually better known as the **Viet Cong** – were a primitive peasant army. In fact, they had been fighting since WW2 and had steadily become more effective.

The VC did not wear uniforms – this made them difficult to identify and allowed them to blend into the background. VC fighters could be men or women, young or old, also making them difficult to identify. They relied on support (eg. food and shelter) from local villages, and followed a Code of Conduct (eg. don't steal goods) to ensure that they stayed popular.

Supplies such as weapons were transported from North Vietnam to the VC in South Vietnam using the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. This was a network of paths which ran through the jungles of Laos and Cambodia and into South Vietnam. The US regularly bombed it but teams of communists would repair the damage.

A significant aspect was that the VC were politically driven and often volunteered to fight for their beliefs – this made them even more determined to resist the Americans.

They were experts at fighting in jungle conditions and had great local knowledge of the terrain.

The VC were experts at making **improvised weapons** (booby traps – e.g. Punji traps) – these were quickly made out of local materials. Within minutes deadly weapons could be made from a few bamboo sticks and rusty nails.

These weapons proved to be more effective in jungle conditions than the USAs' \$multi-million equipment.

The VC had built a sophisticated **tunnel system** (eg. the Cu Chi tunnels which ran from Saigon to the border with Cambodia), which allowed them to appear and disappear at will. It also protected them during air raids. The Americans didn't discover these tunnels until after a year of fighting.

The VC also used **unconventional tactics** – they would disappear into the background when attacked, and then attack back when the US was least expecting it. They also used **sabotage** and **ambushes** very effectively.

In addition the VC were respectful of the local Vietnamese population, following the **Viet Cong code of conduct** and would help farmers in the fields – this meant that the local population always protected them.

Finally, the rural countryside – ¾ of the population – were farmers and were **more sympathetic to the communist ideas** of land redistribution rather than democracy.

It is estimated that 10% of all American casualties in Vietnam were caused by booby traps.

These tactics were hard for the US to combat and led to the **morale** of US soldiers falling. The **average age of a US marines was 19**. They only had to serve one year and then they could go home- the aim for such young 'green' conscripts became survival not to win the war. Many American soldiers turned to drink, drugs and prostitutes. Some committed war crimes.



## Why did the US use new tactics? Why didn't they work?

-Traditional tactics resulted in US casualties and the USA realised that it had to fight from a safe distance and avoid hand-to-hand fighting wherever possible.

'**Saturation**' bombing as part of Operation Rolling Thunder had failed so the US turned to new tactics.

'**Search and Destroy**' (also known as *Zippo Raids*)- The US built safe bases from which to launch sudden helicopter attacks. They would wait for intelligence and quickly attack VC strongholds (which would then be burnt down), before returning to base...

...however these missions often targeted the wrong villages resulting in civilian casualties. American soldiers also lost self-control because of the short intensive nature of the attacks and sought revenge. e.g. My Lai.

**Napalm** - This was a new weapon, an explosive gel dropped in canisters from the air. They were intended to burn the jungle and destroy VC hiding places and food supplies.....however napalm caused terrible injuries to anyone that got in its way, this often included innocent civilians.



**Agent Orange** – This was a defoliant (weed killer) sprayed by planes to destroy the jungle and VC hiding places and food supplies.....however it poisoned water, soil and food supplies. Many locals were poisoned. 500,000 children were later born with birth defects.

These new weapons and tactics had a common failing – they were indiscriminate in nature. They could not distinguish between guilty and innocent, old or young, men or women. **As a result many innocent civilians were harmed by US tactics- turning many South Vietnamese against the US troops sent to 'save' them from communism! These tactics turned civilians towards the Viet Cong.**

**A turning point in the war - The Tet Offensive 1968.** After 4 years of fighting the end was not 'just around the corner'.

In January 1968, the Viet Cong made a sudden and unexpected change of tactic. On 31st January when American soldiers were expecting the VC to be celebrating their New Year, 70,000 made a co-ordinated attack on South Vietnamese towns and cities – the most high profile of these was when the VC attacked the **American embassy in Saigon**.

This was a move away from guerrilla warfare and towards conventional warfare – the VC were now fighting the USA on mass and in the open.

The Tet Offensive initially caught America off guard and gave the VC some success. However the US soldiers quickly recovered and fought back killing 30,000 Viet Cong and regaining control.

American military leaders such as *General Westmoreland* claimed (with some justification) that they were now winning the war and asked for more men to be sent out to 'finish the job'.

However the Tet Offensive was a shock to the American public who believed media reports by **Walter Cronkite** suggesting that the VC were close to a final breakthrough, and that the war was unwinnable. Politicians refused to send over extra troops and the American advantage was lost. For the VC this was a 'total war' for their survival, their homes, their country.

**The Tet Offensive was a turning point in the Vietnam War** – a military success but a media failure for the US army. This led to President Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 election as he felt he had lost the public's support – "*If I've lost Cronkite, then I've lost middle America*". A coordinated attack showed the VC were growing in strength, ability, numbers and were not on the brink of defeat. Even if the offensive failed the damage had been done.

### **The My Lai Massacre 1968 (not reported until 1969)**

- This was an important example of a Search and Destroy mission which went wrong.
- On 16th March 1968 the village of My Lai was incorrectly identified as a VC stronghold and attacked.
- US Soldiers of **Charlie ('C') Company led by Lieut. William Calley** attacked the village and lost self-control.
- Over 500 innocent villagers were killed, maimed or raped. Many of the men were out of their village working that day, so many of the victims were women and children.
- The youngest was a one year old baby, the oldest was an 80 year old woman.
- **Atrocities** such as My Lai had happened before in other wars, but this time it was caught on film.
- Once the event was publicised in the press by Seymour Hersh and in **with the trial in 1971** and on TV, it became a key event in turning public opinion against the war.
- **William Calley** was put on trial, found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.
- However many felt that he was a **scapegoat** (since 33 had been involved in the massacre) and he was later released from prison in 1974.

