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**“JACK OF ALL TRADES:” THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ARMORED CAVALRY IN
VIETNAM**

By

**Robert Manson Peters
B.A., Randolph-Macon College, 1989**

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
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for the Degree of**

Master of Arts

**Department of History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky**

August 2005

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ABSTRACT

“JACK OF ALL TRADES:” THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ARMORED CAVALRY IN VIETNAM

Robert Manson Peters

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This thesis is a chronological historical examination of armored cavalry doctrine and execution during the Vietnam War, with a focus on comparison of the armored cavalry's doctrinal missions of reconnaissance, security, and economy of force with the reality of execution on the ground. In Vietnam, a metamorphosis occurred between these doctrinal missions and actual execution due to a series of factors, such as the nature of area warfare and a relative lack of doctrinal preparedness, the latter largely due to the doctrinal flux of the early 1960s, myths about warfare in Vietnam, and institutional resistance. The metamorphosis also occurred because it had to, and *could*, because of the many positive attributes of the cavalry, and because a series of other new enablers supplanted and masked the loss of cavalry in performing their doctrinal missions. The enablers ranged from new reconnaissance concepts and units, to the rise of technologies and increased surveillance abilities. Despite all the changes in execution from doctrine due to the demands of an extremely complex and multi-faceted war, cavalry and armor doctrine returned to its conventional focus following the war, while most of the adapted doctrine was relegated to peripheral manuals.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE ROAD TO VIETNAM.....	8
III. ARMORED CAVALRY DOCTRINE AND EXECUTION IN VIETNAM.....	33
IV. THE METAMORPHOSIS EXAMINED.....	143
V. THE POST-VIETNAM LEGACY.....	165
REFERENCES.....	176
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	183

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Webster's dictionary, doctrine has several meanings, all interrelated and applicable in the military sense. The definitions represent the entire range of Army operations from the smallest unit levels up to national level policy. First, doctrine is "something taught." Second, it is "a principle or body of principles presented by a specific field, system, or organization for acceptance or belief." In the case of the cavalry, it is part of the proponent of armor and cavalry, a branch of the combat arms. Doctrine according to this second definition also serves as a common language with the other combat arms, infantry and artillery. Third, doctrine can be a "rule or principle of law, especially when established by precedent," which are universally applicable concepts such as mass, speed, agility, tempo, surprise, etc, which can be used in the application of more specific doctrine. Fourthly, it can be a "statement of government policy, especially in foreign affairs." This is where doctrine connects military activities with government policy objectives.¹

Doctrine is at times prescriptive, outlining specific actions to take; at other times it is a general guideline, not to be followed all the time to the letter, but to be adjusted on the ground as needed, dependent on the factors of METT – mission accomplishment, enemy factors, friendly troops capability, and the dictates of the terrain. So, while it can

¹ Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary (1988), s.v. "doctrine."

be specific, doctrine is also set of guidelines within which to operate. To add to this, doctrine can, and must change if determined that something entirely different or some variation of doctrine works better. If an army cannot adapt when necessary, it will fail.

Doctrinally, the history of the mission of the cavalry is lively and varied. From the earliest times, cavalry (mounted warfare) contributed in many different ways to the conduct of warfare, including providing greater speed, mass, and shock affect. Cavalry has always been characterized by speed, but yet aspects of the cavalry have been emphasized differently at different times. For example, shock affect was used by the cuirassiers of Napoleon, while shock effect was not used by cavalry during the U.S. Civil War in the same sense.

Perhaps cavalry's greatest and most significant doctrinal role, however, has been reconnaissance. The ability to conduct reconnaissance was greatly improved by the mobility of the horse, using it to transport the soldier in order to find the enemy more quickly. The cavalry used its speed and mobility to gain and maintain contact with the enemy, preferably with stealth, in order to gain intelligence for and protect the remainder of maneuver forces. Typically the cavalry gained and maintained contact with the enemy in order to allow the rest of the friendly maneuver forces to destroy the enemy at a critical point on the battlefield. Cavalry also confirmed or denied the disposition of enemy elements for planning purposes for friendly missions, and countered enemy reconnaissance.

Reconnaissance was the primary mission of cavalry leading into World War II, but by the end of the war, U.S. cavalry came to be associated with a more robust set of

“trinity” doctrinal missions: reconnaissance, security, and economy of force.² The ability and requirement doctrinally to conduct these missions set the cavalry apart from pure tank forces. The goal of security is to keep the main force from being under observation by the enemy, and to keep them safe from surprise. Security missions consisted of screening, guarding, or covering the main body of forces from enemy reconnaissance and enemy main forces, with each mission representing increasing levels of protection. Economy of force is both a principle of war and an operation, and consists of offensive or defensive missions that direct cavalry forces to find the enemy, and then conduct an array of military operations once contact is made. The principle of economy of force is to occupy as many of the enemy’s forces as possible with a smaller, armed and mobile force specially trained and equipped for the task (such as the cavalry), thus allowing and facilitating the bulk of friendly force maneuver units’ ability to achieve their objectives, which may or may not be the destruction of that particular enemy force. Thus, by the end of World War II, regarding reconnaissance, it was an accepted concept that cavalry needed to have the means to fight for information; stealth, while worthwhile, was not always practical or achievable. However, by the end of World War II, the cavalry was associated with all three “trinity” missions rather than just reconnaissance.

Cavalry doctrine of the mid-1960’s, leading up to the introduction of ground forces in South Vietnam, still centered on the “trinity.” Cavalry doctrine was primarily based, as was the larger Army doctrine, on a conventional conflict such as World War II, or a future Cold War conflict with Warsaw Pact forces on a European battlefield, even though President Kennedy’s policy of “Flexible Response” of the early 1960’s sought to

² The term “trinity”, for the doctrinal missions of reconnaissance, security, and economy of force was first observed in the monograph by Major J. Bryan Mullins, “The Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry.”

prepare the Army to fight low-intensity conflicts such as insurgencies. Conventional conflict was linear warfare with front lines which demarcated friendly from enemy, and was based on the threat model of Warsaw Pact forces of the Cold War. The reality of the situation in Vietnam, however, necessitated fighting differently, and thus challenged cavalry doctrine, causing in-country changes and adjustments, some of which found their way into doctrine after the fact.

In general, doctrine did not reflect, or predict the ultimate type of conflict that U.S. forces faced in Vietnam. Doctrine lagged mainly because it did not anticipate the nature of the war in Vietnam and what it would require of an Army with largely conventional doctrine, although there were some warning signs. Further, there were several large myths about the Vietnam War which arguably retarded doctrinal preparation, including the idea that fighting guerillas was infantryman's work and that the jungle was no place for armor. The prior defeat of the French in Vietnam created wariness of meeting the same demise. In short, the myths helped delay doctrinal efforts to prepare for what lay ahead. By the end of the Vietnam War, however, if not sooner, the myths were dispelled, and armored cavalry more than proved themselves. The resulting experiences were enough collectively to cause the Army to coin a new doctrinal term for their collective operations in Vietnam: stability operations.

In the Vietnam War, the armored cavalry that participated varied: divisional cavalry squadrons, an armored cavalry regiment, air cavalry troops and squadrons, and separate cavalry troops. This study looks at the doctrine and execution of the division cavalry squadrons and one armored cavalry regiment. The division cavalry squadron is by doctrine the reconnaissance, security, and economy of force asset for the division – the

“eyes and ears.” On the eve of Vietnam, their organization consisted of three ground cavalry troops and an air cavalry troop. The three cavalry platoons that made up the ground troops were integrated, combined arms platoons composed of a tank section, a scout section, a mounted rifle squad, and a support squad that provided mortar support. This organization was an extremely effective and potent combined arms team. The armored cavalry regiment was by doctrine responsible for the same trinity of missions. It was a “stand alone” asset that could be used as part of army groups, armies, or corps.³ The regiment consisted mainly of three ground squadrons of three cavalry troops and one tank troop each, plus one air cavalry troop for the entire regiment. Additionally, every squadron in the regiment, plus the division cavalry squadrons had their own howitzer battery artillery, which gave them a lot of additional firepower under their own control. There were other separate cavalry troops that served in Vietnam, but they are not part of the scope of this study.⁴

The U.S. Army’s challenge in Vietnam was new because the war brought together levels of complexity previously not seen. The war stands out for this reason. It was an atypical war – so much so that to this day there is disagreement as to what type of war it was – a conventional war, an unconventional war, a counterinsurgent war, a revolutionary war, a war against colonialism, a war won by politicians and lost by generals or vice versa, a war of winning the “hearts and minds” of the people, a war of South Vietnamese leadership, or a blend of any of these. In fact, this confusion over terminology is in itself instructive.⁵ In the end, perhaps the best definition is that the U.S.

³ FM 17-95, Armored Cavalry Regiment 1960, 7.

⁴ The First Cavalry Division was not truly cavalry in the sense of conducting trinity missions; rather, they were an airmobile division with primarily maneuver missions.

⁵ Major Robert A. Doughty, “The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-1976.”

faced a largely insurgent, guerilla-style enemy that could strike anywhere at any time by using the jungle terrain to his advantage, resulting in a non-linear and omni-directional battlefield, which created area warfare – a war with no front lines. Area warfare resulted from this combination of the challenging terrain, and an enemy that largely refused to face U.S. conventional forces, except on his terms.

At the same time, the war in Vietnam created a three-fold challenge for doctrine and execution. At the top of spectrum there was still a conventional enemy threat – mainly the North Vietnamese regular units that fought in South Vietnam. In the middle were the various Viet Cong units, from small guerrilla groups of 3-4 individuals, to battalion and regimental-sized units. At the other end was pacification -- the civil-military aspect of the war that emphasized providing assistance and security to the people of South Vietnam, along with empowering the South Vietnamese Army and government. All of these aspects of the war made it a major change for an Army that within the previous ten years had been postured first to fight a nuclear war on the plains of Europe, and then a conventional war.

As a result of the challenges of fighting primarily an insurgent enemy in an area war in Vietnam, the doctrinal, conventional trinity missions of the cavalry changed in terms of execution, intent, and even meaning. The changes represented a metamorphosis between doctrinal missions and what was actually executed, but they also reflected attempts to better address the situation in Vietnam. Proof of the de facto metamorphosis of the trinity is found in new missions and mission terminology; comparison of execution with trinity doctrine; the need to conduct and the results of studies on the conduct of armored cavalry's operations in Vietnam, and in the flurry of new doctrine that appeared

(Ft. Leavenworth, KS : U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1979), 41.

in the late 1960's. Further evidence is also found in the fact that execution led doctrine, and in the proliferation of armor doctrinal tasks.

In light of all of the unique aspects of the war, doctrinal questions still exist. Most military leaders from that era qualified their commentary with the typical statement to the effect that while modified, cavalry doctrine was "still valid." However, if it is safe to say that doctrine's mission is preparing U.S. soldiers for the next conflict, then in the case of the cavalry, with regard to Vietnam the mission failed. What actually happened was that execution led and doctrine followed. Execution relied on basic combat skills already developed by the units. In the process, by heaping new missions on the plate of the cavalry, the trinity missions were largely supplanted, but yet the doctrine that was outlined in response to the new missions was too cursory. Vietnam was not the first time, however, that cavalry entered a conflict expecting to perform certain missions and exited with something different.

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD TO VIETNAM

U.S. Cavalry previously experienced a doctrinal metamorphosis in the heat of conflict. Immediately prior to World War II, the role of cavalry was to serve as light, reconnaissance oriented forces. During the course of the war, cavalry units became progressively better armed and equipped, and as a result they were increasingly able to function in a combat role, freeing up heavier combat maneuver units to concentrate elsewhere. The end result was that they saw fewer and fewer reconnaissance missions, and by the end of the war the cavalry had evolved into a trinity role with expanded emphasis on economy of force and security missions.⁶

An example of this is how in 1943, the concept of a cavalry group was created, which consisted of two cavalry reconnaissance squadrons and other attachments, and which typically operated in support of a corps.⁷ They took advantage of their mobility and firepower to cover vast expanses of terrain, with minimal forces. A reconnaissance platoon of nine vehicles had the same firepower as dismounted infantry company, but far better mobility and communications.⁸ At the end of the war a study of cavalry group missions revealed the shift in expectations of their use from reconnaissance to other areas: 3% on reconnaissance, 33% defending terrain, 29% special operations (acting as

⁶ Major J. Bryan Mullins, "Defining the Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry," (M.M.S. Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), 34.

⁷ Major J. Bryan Mullins, "Defining the Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry," 36.

⁸ Major J. Bryan Mullins, "Defining the Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry," 37.

a mobile reserve, providing for security and control of rear areas), 10% in the attack, and 25% providing security. Another example is the Cavalry Recon Squadrons, which belonged to divisions. They performed reconnaissance missions 13% of the time.⁹ These percentages, among others, and the evolution of mechanized cavalry during the war, were used to justify the growing emphasis on the full trinity of operations (as opposed to primarily reconnaissance). The emphasis continued after the war. Clearly, the doctrine at the beginning of the war was not in synch with the actual missions conducted. Reconnaissance, still the point of emphasis at the time of the Normandy invasion, was reduced over the course of the campaign in France and Germany – a significant difference between the doctrine, and actual execution. At the end of the war, surveys and studies were conducted on Mechanized Cavalry operations. Out of these came the conclusions that combat was necessary in order to conduct reconnaissance, and that cavalry units were seen as “multi-functional units that could do just about anything with the right mix of attachments.”¹⁰

Thus, though cavalry in both World War II and Vietnam experienced differences between doctrine and execution, the execution in World War II became the new cavalry doctrine at the end of the war. In Vietnam, this was not the case.

Toward Vietnam and Flexible Response

The history of world events, politics, and resultant military strategy went through many changes during the intervening 20 years between WW II and the war in Vietnam. In the aftermath of WW II, the Cold War began – a war of words and tensions, based on

⁹ Major J. Bryan Mullins, “Defining the Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry,” 36.

¹⁰ General Board Report, “Mechanized Cavalry Units,” File R 320.2/6, Study Number 49, 1945. Armor School Library, Ft. Knox, KY, 9.

the concept of mutually assured destruction. As a function of this new weaponry, politics and military strategy changed, and as they did, so too did military doctrine.

While the world managed to avoid the ultimate clash of nuclear arms, through mutual deterrence, the trade-off was a rash of other classifications of warfare that sprang up. Most were not new to the history of warfare, but what was new was an attempt to study and label them. Among them were partisan warfare, guerilla warfare, irregular warfare, revolutionary warfare, and unconventional warfare. Most of these types had occurred before, repeatedly, throughout history.

In 1961, the Kennedy administration brought with it reforms in the military that would affect the conduct of the war in more ways than one. With an increasingly belligerent Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the helm, Kennedy came in believing that the world was at a critical juncture, and that the survival of the U.S. depended on its ability to “defend “free” institutions” without necessarily using the nuclear option. With this in mind, he moved to expand options for the containment of Communism.¹¹

Realizing that the military needed to be able to meet threats in emerging countries, seen as the next battlegrounds in the fight against Communism, he adopted the policy of “Flexible Response,” replacing the “massive retaliation” policy of Eisenhower. The essence of “Flexible Response” was to better prepare the military to fight without nuclear weapons.¹² To do this a more flexible organizational structure was needed, one that could respond to the “entire spectrum” of possible conflicts because the Pentomic Division of the 1950’s was oriented to nuclear war and lacked a flexible command and

¹¹ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1986), 73-74.

¹² Alan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*. (N.Y. : The Free Press, 1984), 536.

control structure. Out of this came the Reorganization Objectives Army Division (ROAD).¹³

The ROAD divisions were a big shift from the Pentomic Division system of the 1950s, which was created with the nuclear battlefield in mind. In a ROAD division infantry and armored divisions were markedly different structures. To increase flexibility the new ROAD Divisions all shared a common base of three brigade headquarters, a cavalry squadron, division artillery, division support command, engineer battalion, and eventually an air defense battalion. The Brigade Headquarters were to take control of tailored brigades, put together for any particular situation. While sharing a common base, there were four types of divisions: infantry divisions, with 8 infantry and 2 tank battalions; airborne infantry, with 8 airborne infantry battalions and one of assault guns; armored, with 6 tank and 5 mechanized infantry battalions, and newly created mechanized infantry divisions with 7 mechanized and 3 tank battalions. Other notable changes brought about by ROAD were that armored infantry shifted from armor proponentcy to infantry, and took the term mechanized infantry.¹⁴ Even more significantly, as part of ROAD, the helicopter came of age. Introduced during the Korean War, the helicopter found valuable use as part of the ROAD with the creation of air cavalry units and other units such as the airmobile infantry of the First Cavalry Division.¹⁵ It was the ROAD divisions that served in Vietnam.¹⁶

¹³ Cpt. Jonathan House, *Towards Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization in the 20th Century*. (Ft. Leavenworth, KS : Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Undated), 158.

¹⁴ W. Blair Haworth, Jr., *The Bradley and How It Got That Way: Technology, Institutions, and the Problem of Mechanized Infantry in the United States Army*. (Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 1999), 29.

¹⁵ Helicopters were formed into units with their own battlefield missions and doctrine. Prior to Vietnam, an air cavalry troop was added to each division's armored cavalry squadron, the armored cavalry regiment, and an air cavalry squadron was added to the airmobile division and infantry divisions. Additionally, there were some separate air cavalry troops. During Vietnam, some of these air cavalry troops became part of an

Adjusting to and anticipating the effects of “Flexible Response” was not easy. Adjustments of doctrine and organizations to perceived threats and challenges throughout the world, while arguably inevitable and necessary, were not without negative repercussions on the force. According to James Dunnigan and Raymond Macedonia, part of the problem in the years prior to Vietnam, was “zig-zagging” doctrine, so called doctrine “du Jour.” They believed that the Army entered Vietnam while in the middle of reorganizing from the nuclear war Pentomic Division configuration to fight a conventional-style war on the plains of Europe or elsewhere – not in a place like Vietnam.¹⁷

One problem appeared to have been that although President Kennedy recognized the rise of counterinsurgency warfare, the primary methods for fighting it were infantry-centric. A sign of this was the “reinvigoration” of the Special Forces branch, specifically designed to address guerilla warfare-style fighting. The prevailing notion was that *if* the U.S. got involved in a limited war versus insurgents, it would be an infantryman’s war. While not an incorrect notion, attempts to visualize mechanized forces participation in counterinsurgent warfare were lacking. W. Blair Haworth said about the Army in 1962 that it relied on “conventional wisdom” regarding the use of armor in unconventional warfare, and that with doctrinal manuals focused on the conventional fight in Europe,

independent aviation brigade, for use as a Corps asset. Additionally, the new Flexible Response doctrine drove the development and creation in 1965 of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

¹⁶ Another significant occurrence in 1962 was the adoption of that year’s version of FM 100-5, simply titled Field Service Regulations, but in practice this field manual was the army’s doctrinal cornerstone, from which, in theory, all other detailed doctrinal statements would derive. The 1962 edition set an important strategic tone, ironically just prior to major involvement in Vietnam, by dropping the concept of “wars of limited objective,” which had come about after the Korean War, and instead introduced the concept of limited means, which essentially codified our reluctance to use nuclear weapons. Strategy ultimately would have an effect on the doctrine and conduct of the war at the operational and tactical levels.

¹⁷ James F. Dunnigan and Raymond M. Macedonia, *Getting It Right: American Military Reforms After Vietnam to the Gulf War and Beyond*. (New York : William Morrow and Co., 1993), 73.

there was little of use for fighting in jungles or in confronting guerillas, except in the “context of rear-area security.”¹⁸ As a result of the infantry–centric approach in the early 1960’s, armored cavalry units were not well prepared doctrinally for what lay ahead, and what lay ahead was daunting. Perhaps the conversion to the ROAD structures was seen as sufficient, enough change at one time. Indeed, the ROAD structures moved the Army far toward better preparing it for the complexities of Vietnam, and the flexibility that would be needed there.

The Origins of the Vietnam War

The origins of the complex Vietnam War and roots of the insurgency began long before the involvement of the U.S. In the wake of World War II, the French, weakened by two World Wars, were trying to reassert their colonial hold over Indochina – present-day Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. While France’s hold was weakened, Vietnamese nationalism had strengthened during the struggle against Japan. Perhaps the most prominent guerrilla leader in that struggle had been Communist-trained Ho Chi Minh. He proclaimed his country’s independence and established the Democratic Government of Vietnam (DRV) in August, 1945.¹⁹ As the French sought to reestablish their control, they clashed with the Vietnamese, led by Ho. The armed conflict began in 1946, and ended ignominiously for the French in 1954 after the disaster at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.²⁰

The French control was deteriorating around the same time the U.S. was signing the armistice that halted the Korean War, a year earlier in 1953. In light of both events,

¹⁸ Haworth, Jr., *The Bradley and How It Got That Way*, 30.

¹⁹ James M. Morris, *America’s Armed Forces: A History*. (Upper Saddle River, N.J. : Prentice Hall, 1996), 327.

²⁰ John M. Carroll and Collin F. Baxter, eds., *The American Military Tradition, From Colonial Times to the Present*. (Wilmington, DE : Scholarly Resources, Inc.), 205.

and the Communist victory over the Nationalists in China in 1949, the U.S. determined that Indochina was part of the frontier in the Cold War. Accordingly, the U.S. provided monetary aid and a handful of U.S. military advisors to support the French prior to 1954. In fact, by 1954, the U.S. was paying for 78% of all French War costs.²¹

Despite U.S. support, France withdrew from Vietnam in 1954 after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu, and the Geneva Peace accords divided Vietnam into two parts, north and south, with the understanding that in 1956 they would be reunited. In the meantime, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) set up a government in the north, so-named and headed by Ho, while a U.S.-backed government was established in the south. As part of the accords, reunification was to occur in 1956, and elections were supposed to be part of it. However, newly elected South Vietnamese President Diem, with American backing, blocked them.²² This reflected concerns that a country-wide election with the more populous and Communist North Vietnamese would not be legitimate or desirable. By 1959 fighting again broke out with Communist guerrillas known as the Viet Cong, who used terrorist tactics and other small-scale actions against the South Vietnamese government.²³

The VC's roots came from the Communist Viet Minh, who fought against the French. Many of the cadres of the Viet Minh were left behind in the south in 1954 when the Vietnam was partitioned, and they established the organization that became known as the Viet Cong (VC) – a political and paramilitary organization. The VC initially pursued a policy of subversion, spying, and terror, which later escalated into guerrilla warfare. By 1960, the VC were employing battalion-sized units, and by 1964, formations of North

²¹ Carroll and Baxter, *The American Military Tradition*, 204.

²² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 54.

²³ Carroll and Baxter, *The American Military Tradition*, 205.

Vietnamese forces were in the South. At that time they were getting ready to make their final push to destabilize and bring about governmental change in South Vietnam.²⁴

In retrospect, it appears that there was a pattern of escalation on the part of the enemy. From the time France left Vietnam until around 1960, the guerrillas used tactics of small unit terror strikes, assassinations and other acts of destabilization. Around 1960, battalion-sized attacks by the VC began, and in the space of one year the attacks were rising in frequency, with multi-battalion attacks appearing in 1961. The South Vietnamese struggled mightily to turn back the tide, raising the numbers of their armed forces, as well as concentrating on other aspects of fighting the insurgency such as pacification – the business of securing and bettering the lives of citizens in the countryside. However, with the assassination of President Diem in 1963, the resultant turmoil in the South Vietnamese government erased most of their progress. By 1964, VC battalions were growing into regiments, and regiments were budding into divisions. The war was careening toward a final “mobile” phase of open warfare, an overt military grab for power. By 1965, the crisis had deepened. The first units of North Vietnamese Regulars were in the south, and were threatening to cut the country in half, and it became apparent that South Vietnam could not hold off the Communists for much longer. By the spring, with the South Vietnamese hemorrhaging men and ground to the enemy, the stage was set for U.S. intervention with ground troops.²⁵

The 1962 CI Study

In the early 1960's, there were those who strove to read the tea leaves and plan for the counterinsurgent warfare threat posed by the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese

²⁴ Lieutenant General Bernard Rogers, *Vietnam Studies: Cedar Falls-Junction City: A Turning Point*. (Washington D.C. : Department of the Army, 1974), 2.

²⁵ Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 5.

supporters. While the Army at large grappled with understanding, defining and preparing for a counterinsurgency, not to mention the transition to the ROAD, all as part of the concept of “Flexible Response,” some members of the armor community did as well. Perhaps the most striking harbinger of what was to come in Vietnam for the armor/cavalry community came in the form of special study, produced by the U.S. Army Armor Combat Developments Agency at Fort Knox, released in 1962. The study was prophetically entitled “The Role of Armored Cavalry in Counterinsurgency Operations.” Its stated purpose was to examine operational and organizational concepts for armor and cavalry units in counterinsurgency operations in order to determine how the armor/cavalry school and force might best prepare. The study was initiated at the request of the by the Assistant Commandant of the Armor School at the time, as an “in house” project, but it grew enough to warrant sending it out ultimately all over the Army.²⁶

The study began by making some overarching observations. It stated that an insurgent-style war with an enemy that appears and disappears demanded “a reappraisal of our organizations and tactical doctrines to insure our ability to assist established friendly governments against this new form of Communist threat.” It also stated that “comprehensive national counterinsurgency plans are required to integrate and coordinate the use of all military and non-military means.” It further recommended organizationally that “armored cavalry organizations be recognized as capable of employment in counterinsurgency in Southeast Asia and similar areas.”²⁷

²⁶ U.S. Army Armor Center Combat Developments Agency Study, “The Role of Armored Cavalry in Counterinsurgent Operations, 1962, Armor School Library, Ft. Knox, Transmittal Memo.

²⁷ USAARCA Study, 2 and Abstract. Organizationally, among its recommendations that were eventually adopted were the replacement of the aviation company of the armored cavalry regiment with a modified air cavalry troop, and the addition of an air cavalry troop to each Divisional Cavalry squadron, which also eventually happened, with incalculable positive affect. It recommended equipping squadrons with armored personnel carriers, such as the T114 and the M113 in lieu of ¼ ton trucks as soon as possible, equipping

Getting more specific, the study makes uncannily accurate predictions and astute recommendations. It recommended that the doctrine and techniques contained in it be adopted for a modified cavalry organization, and that the modified organization be tested in the U.S. It elaborated on counterinsurgency, stating that “counterinsurgency warfare is an attempt at pacification,” and that the basic military problem is “to maintain or restore internal security so that other elements of the counterinsurgency program can operate.”²⁸ Further, the study mentioned that military activities of friendly forces would consist of three phases: isolation, destruction, and reconstruction. Isolation was important because the study states that it is important to cut off the guerrilla from his source of support – the people. It mentions that reconstruction is usually carried out at the same time as the first two phases. It also mentions many of the points that eventually appeared in the 1973 version of the Division Cavalry manual eleven years later, including harassing insurgents to prevent regrouping, learning the terrain, mounting small scale operations to search for and attack insurgent bases, reacting promptly to attacks, and understanding the importance of the offense.²⁹

The study was an accurate predictor of how the trinity missions might be conducted in insurgent operation, and the predictions showed major modifications in the trinity. It predicted the cavalry’s role in conducting security missions such as route and lines of communication security, convoy escort missions, and security of fixed sites. It predicted that route security and convoy escort would probably be the “primary tasks.” Regarding reconnaissance, recommendations are sparse but accurate. It stated that “air

them with protective cupolas and adding machine gun armament to them. All of this eventually happened, except that T114 was found to unfit for duty and was fully replaced by the M113.

²⁸ USAARCA Study, 2.

²⁹ USAARCA Study, 3.

and armored cavalry elements can conduct reconnaissance of “selected areas” and route reconnaissance.³⁰ The term “selected areas” was eerily similar to the term eventually adopted eleven years later in the 1973 manual, where the terms of zone or area reconnaissance or reconnaissance in force were replaced with the definition of “specific” reconnaissance.³¹ There was no mention of economy of force.

The most specific recommendations acknowledged the need for a change away from conventional tactics and doctrine, to doctrine that recognized a different enemy in different terrain. It acknowledged that in an insurgency, the primary focus was not on the terrain but rather on the enemy. The study further mentioned the advantages that armored cavalry forces would provide because of their protection, flexibility, and ability to offset any enemy armor, and that that ability to conduct convoy escorts would be useful. The study recommended that “current tactics and techniques of armored cavalry operations require considerable expansion for counterinsurgency operations,” and identified the need for supplementary training for it.³²

The study concluded with several informative annexes. The annexes were “The Potential Enemy,” followed by “Friendly Forces,” “Terrain Analysis,” and “Tactics and Techniques of Counterinsurgency Operations.” This last annex was particularly noteworthy, since it was taken almost verbatim and plugged into the 1965 Division Squadron Manual as the portion dealing with Counterinsurgency Operations! With regard to this last annex, the main difference was that the 1962 study stated that the conventional trinity tasks of the cavalry “do not necessarily” apply in counterinsurgency operations, whereas the 1965 Division Cavalry manual stated that the doctrine of armored

³⁰ USAARCDCA Study, 5.

³¹ FM 17-36 Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron 1973, 8-4.

³² USAARCDCA Study, 8.

cavalry in “conventional offensive and defensive operations” applied to counterinsurgency situations.³³

The study missed the mark in some areas. It recommended the M114 armored personnel carrier (APC) to take the place of the light tanks in cavalry platoons, but the M114 ultimately did not work out in Vietnam because its shape caused it to get stuck more easily when crossing through canals and similar terrain. Ultimately the M114 was replaced by the more mobile M113 APC, while tanks proved themselves functional and worthwhile in Vietnam.³⁴ It stated, not entirely incorrectly, that “armored cavalry is marginally effective in performing encirclements and pursuits,” but it touts the ability to conduct raids, ambushes, and counterattacks, but by the 1973 Division Cavalry manual, only the raid and ambush were still mentioned specifically as part of stability operations.³⁵ It also undersold the notion of armored cross-country mobility. The study’s authors attempted to get better knowledge of mobility in Vietnam by discussing various jungle areas in South America, but the trafficability map they produced of Vietnam and Indochina still showed most of the region as “impassable.”³⁶ This issue of mobility, one of the most potent of the “anti-armor” advocates, would have to wait on actual experience and the results of later Army studies that would dissipate the myths surrounding it. The study proposed that to achieve better mobility than the insurgents, the armored cavalry

³³ USAARCA Study, 195, E-10. Further, it states that “tactically, armored cavalry must not become bogged down in attempting conventional operations against a usually elusive enemy, but must take advantage of superior flexibility and mobility, particularly air mobility.”

³⁴ USAARCA Study, G-2. Part of the issue with dispensing with tanks in the cavalry platoons is due to the fact that the enemy was not anticipated to have tanks or anti-tank capability. It was thought that retaining the tank companies of the armored cavalry regiment would be enough in that event.

³⁵ FM 17-36 Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron, 1973, 15-5.

³⁶ USAARCA Study, Tab A to Appendix 3.

“must be able to leave the ground and move through the air with much it its force.”³⁷

While it is not exactly clear what lift assets would be able to transport that many armored vehicles through the air, it is true that air lift assets did eventually play a critical role in logistical resupply.

The Counterinsurgent Study was thoughtful, and presaged many of the issues that surrounded the introduction of armored combat units to Vietnam, and continued to dog their execution in country. It predicted armored vehicles role in a combat environment such as Vietnam. It predicted the trinity tasks being conducted differently, especially with regard to security. It predicted area warfare, a defining characteristic of the war, by stating that “armored cavalry must expand its activities beyond conventional tactics and doctrine devised for different terrain and a different enemy. Such doctrine is designed generally to control ground; this enemy has little interest in the ground except as concealment for his activities.”³⁸ It also strove to fight for armor’s place at the counterinsurgent table, while acknowledging that the infantry would be the “primary indigenous” counterinsurgency force.³⁹ The study’s commentary on armor and cavalry’s role in a counterinsurgent environment reflected a perception that their use in that type of environment was not widely, or seriously considered.

Eerily prophetic though the Counterinsurgency Study was, its doctrinal recommendations were not heeded with the exception of its recommendations for organizational adjustments. Why recommendations were not acted on in terms of

³⁷ USAARCD Study, 4. It may be that this thought was related to the fact that the CI Study stated a desire for the use of a light tank, with the possibility of air transportability, hence better mobility. With the M48A3, the main tank of the Divisional Cavalry, this was not possible. Later, in 1969, with introduction of the Sheridan tank, this idea may have been closer to reality.

³⁸ USAARCD Study, 6.

³⁹ USAARCD Study, I-3. This is seen at the end of the report where the responses to the study from the Infantry Combat Development Agency are published, along with the responses from the Armor Combat Development Agency to them.

recognizing armored cavalry's potential contribution in the counterinsurgent fight and planning for it is a matter of question because lack of circulation was not the problem. In addition to the Fort Knox chain of command, it was staffed through the Commanding General, U.S. Army Combined Arms Group at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and was directed to the attention of the Commanding General, U.S. Army Combat Developments Command located at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, while copies were furnished to other proponent schools.⁴⁰

The Influence of Mythologies of Armored Combat in the Jungle

As the Counterinsurgent Study evidently felt compelled to point out, the use of mounted, armored units such as the cavalry were not truly considered part of the counterinsurgent strategy. In fact, their ultimate use in Vietnam was far from pre-ordained, but rather seemed to happen by accident, despite such warning signs as the 1962 study. Part of the reasons for a lack of serious institutional consideration and hence planning for their use stemmed from many sources, but a particularly large source were myths that existed about armored use in such environments.

One of the largest of these myths was the nature of the terrain. Ever since the World War II, prevalent assumptions about the use of armored/mechanized units were based on armor studies from the battles and campaigns of Europe and North Africa. In contrast, the experience in Korea and the Pacific during Word War II suggested that tanks and mechanized forces were of limited use in the mountains and jungle.⁴¹ In Korea, experience showed that tanks tended to be more road-bound because of channeling,

⁴⁰ The Infantry School in particular provided pages of feedback, and it is extremely interesting to read. The report also includes USAARCD's responses to their feedback. The infantry school's overwhelming tone was that counterinsurgency was an infantryman's war. P. I-16, USAARCD, CI Study.

⁴¹ General Don Starry, *Mounted Combat In Vietnam*. (Washington, D.C. : Department of the Army, 1978), 6.

restrictive terrain, while in the Pacific theater, tanks were ultimately denied true mobility by the size of the islands that they fought on.

What many did not seem to realize was that the terrain in Vietnam was actually much more suitable for armored and mechanized forces than initially believed. However, it took in-depth in-country studies to point this out, *after* ground forces arrived. The principal of these studies as they pertained to mounted combat was one entitled “The Evaluation of U.S. Army Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam,” also known as the MACOV study, released in 1967. It was conducted to find out whether a pattern of mechanized and armor combat was emerging. By that time, U.S. ground forces had been involved in combat in Vietnam for two years.

The study conducted terrain assessments of each of the four Corps Tactical Zones, starting with CTZ I in the north bordering North Vietnam, running II, III, and IV to the south respectively, with the IV CTZ being south of Saigon, primarily the Mekong Delta region. It revealed that terrain in Vietnam was quite passable by armor and mechanized units. This study by CTZ was important, because each CTZ had defining terrain and weather characteristics. I CTZ, the northernmost zone, had population that lived mainly along a narrow strip of coastal land where rice growing was possible. It bordered North Vietnam, with a type of Demilitarized Zone. II CTZ was very broad, long, and included a wide range of differing terrain, from the heavily populated littoral belt, to a middle composed of a rugged belt of mountains that covered 64% of the zone, to the heavily forested highlands in the west, which bordered Cambodia and Laos. III CTZ was the most heavily populated, contained Saigon, and was the political center of South Vietnam. Its terrain ranged from dense mangroves and swamps

to piedmont terrain. In it were included infamous areas known to many U.S. soldiers, such as the Iron Triangle, and War Zones C and D. IV CTZ was primarily an ARVN area of operations, and was flat, rice paddy terrain primarily, and included the Mekong River delta.⁴²

The MACOV study went further. It identified four primary types of terrain within Vietnam: coastal lowlands, highlands, plateau, and piedmont. This variability of terrain, taken together with the seasonal weather patterns, determined the ability of armored / mechanized units to conduct operations in Vietnam, with emphasis on thickness of vegetation, ruggedness of terrain, and mud during the wet season. In fact, the study found that tanks could move with organic support in 63% of the country in the dry season, and 43% during the wet season. Armored personnel carriers (APCs) were found to be able to move in 69% of the country year-round.⁴³ There also significant finding with regard to the weather. Weather patterns affected different parts of Vietnam differently, during different times of the year. This ultimately allowed for armored and mechanized usage during all parts of the year, albeit in different CTZ's.

Another large factor that contributed to the reluctance to use mounted warfare on Vietnamese terrain came, and not unfairly so, from the ignominious end of the French. The French had used armor in Vietnam, but there were several factors involved with their use that caused them to have the problems that they did. One was that they did not have much armor to begin with, and the little that they did have was used in piecemeal fashion. The French had 452 tanks and tank destroyers and 1,985 scout cars scattered over 228,627 square miles; by contrast, later U.S. forces employed more than that over

⁴² U.S. Army Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam (MACOV) Study, United States Army, Vietnam (USARV), March 1967, iii.

⁴³ MACOV Study, 48.

territory one-third as large.⁴⁴ A large part of the problem was that the vehicles were World War II vintage, lacked parts and adequate transmissions for true cross-country mobility, and were hard to resupply -- the helicopter just beginning to enter the picture. U.S. forces came to rely heavily on the helicopter for all forms of resupply. In retrospect, this may have been the single biggest innovation and enabler for armored forces in Vietnam, and it was one that the French could not call upon.

Furthermore, there were stories of how the French armor was beaten badly, even when deployed with some numbers. One particular incident stood out in the readings of the U.S., described by author Bernard Fall in his landmark book on the French experience in Vietnam – *Street Without Joy*. In it he recounted the debacle of a French mobile striking force, called Groupement Mobile 100. Composed of various vehicles, half-tracks, and tanks, it was put to the test right after it was created.⁴⁵ Though it was called “one of the best and heaviest units of its type” the group was essentially destroyed by a series of ambushes by the Viet Minh, and the story is a chilling account. There is little wonder that it influenced thinking that Vietnam was no place for armored vehicles!

Then there was the idea that fighting guerillas was an infantryman’s war. Counterguerilla operations came to prominence as part of President Kennedy’s “Flexible Response,” and as doctrine and the Army as an institution grappled with how best to articulate it in the midst of Army-wide reorganization, the tendency may have been to fall back on what was familiar – the use of infantry. After all, guerilla warfare is described in the 1951 FM 31-20, Operations Against Guerilla Forces, as “one of the oldest methods of

⁴⁴ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 3.

⁴⁵ Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy*, (Mechanicsburg, PA : Stackpole, 1964), 241.

waging war.”⁴⁶ Prior to 1965 the U.S. Army had published many manuals on guerrilla warfare, which emphasized fighting guerillas as primarily a matter for infantry. The 1951 manual stated that “infantry normally is the principal arm employed in active counterguerilla operations. Available supporting arms and services are used in accordance with the situation.”⁴⁷ Thus, it appeared that the Army was simply continuing a trend that had been around for a long time, albeit with a few new wrinkles such as the Special Forces.

The armor community did not do itself any favors in envisioning its place at the counterinsurgency table, outside of some professional discussion in forums such as *Armor* magazine by advisors and others with experience there, and a few farsighted individuals and studies, such as the 1962 Counterinsurgent Study. By and large, there was institutional resistance to the idea. According to retired General Don Starry, author of the capstone work on mounted combat in Vietnam, most armor soldiers did not give the conflict in Vietnam much thought, being preoccupied with the potential conventional scenario in Europe. Higher ranking armor officers generally dismissed discussion of war in Vietnam as a matter best left to the infantry, and in the Armor Officer Advanced Course of 1964-65, Vietnam was not formally discussed! This was largely the way of thinking leading up to the war.⁴⁸

The Counterinsurgent War

Not only did armor, cavalry, and the Army at large subscribe to these myths, but they wrestled with the very definition of a counterinsurgency in the years prior to the war, and how best to fight it. This was a dilemma shared by historians, military officers,

⁴⁶ FM 31-20, Operations Against Guerilla Forces 1951, iii.

⁴⁷ FM 31-20, 1951, 74.

⁴⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 51.

politicians, and civil servants before, during, and after the war.⁴⁹ Some, such as Colonel Harry Summers Jr., felt that the war was a conventional war as evidenced by the fact that the final end of war came with the defeat of South Vietnamese army by conventional means. The war officially ended when the North Vietnamese rode into Saigon on their tanks. He believed that the Viet Cong were used as a “smokescreen” by the North Vietnamese, hiding their true conventional aspirations for South Vietnam under the cloak and guise of revolutionary war. This led to misguided attempts to analyze the nature of the war, resulting in labeling it a counterinsurgency, when in fact it was a conventional fight – the wolf in sheepskin. His view was that the large-scale destruction of the Viet Cong- led cadres who surfaced en masse during the Tet attacks of 1968 and suffered horrendous losses as a result was what the North Vietnamese wanted, ultimately.⁵⁰ He also felt that the war, correspondingly, could have been won with conventional means. The U.S. failed to win with conventional means because the U.S. was handcuffed by its strategic policy, one of containment rather than victory over a Communist Power.⁵¹

In an article written in 1972, another supporter for the conventional approach, LTC Zeb Bradford, presents additional arguments for the conventional approach to insurgencies. He believed that political power could not ultimately be attained by an enemy that could not grasp the reins of power with conventional means – that final victory for the Communists ultimately depended on mobile warfare. In the case of Vietnam, this ultimately happened. Doctrinally, he felt that the Army should concentrate

⁴⁹ There are two schools of thought, according to Donald Hamilton, on page seven in his book *The Art of Insurgency*. One is called the conventional school, and the other is the insurgency school. In his book, he reaches conclusions that are at odds with the conventional school.

⁵⁰ Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*. (Carlisle Barracks, PA : Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1982), 60.

⁵¹ Summers, *On Strategy*, 55.

its efforts in devising a “near-conventional” doctrine, not take a guerrilla-on-guerrilla approach. To do the latter would sacrifice the U.S.’s great technological advantages needlessly. He states that “near-conventional doctrine” with some overlapping conventional uses would be more useful, and brings up the point that guerrilla forces would not be put into a foreign country early enough anyway to counter an insurgency. Rather, if a situation got too bad, then “fire-brigade” units would be called in. In this view, he was a realist.⁵²

Others felt that the enemy in Vietnam was an insurgency, and therefore our war against an insurgency was a counterinsurgency. There were many differing opinions as to what constitutes an insurgency, with leading theorists of the day positing their theories. An example of a theory is one by David Glagula in his 1964 book *Counterinsurgency Warfare*. In it he stated that insurgencies were revolutionary and had the following steps: 1) creation of a party; 2) a united front; 3) guerrilla warfare; 4) movement warfare; 5) annihilation campaign.⁵³ He initially emphasized the civil aspects of a war to defeat an insurgency by stating that “conventional operations by themselves have at best no more effect than a fly swatter.”⁵⁴ However, he did feel that an insurgency could be defeated, not by fighting an insurgency with his own type of warfare, but by gaining the support of the population and by obtaining active participation by at least a minority of them. He described finding “a favorable minority, to organize it in order to mobilize the population against the insurgent minority.” Ultimate victory is obtained with destruction of the

⁵² LTC Zeb Bradford, “U.S. Tactics in Vietnam,” *Military Review* (February 1972) : 75.

⁵³ David Glagula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*. (New York : Praeger, 1964), 44 to 57. He also outlined another type of insurgency, called the Bourgeois-Nationalist Pattern, which he calls a “shortcut” for the insurgent. It consists of blind terrorist acts, and selective terrorist acts, with the goal of the insurgents to shortcut the process of gaining the support of the population. This appears to be similar to methods being conducted in Iraq.

⁵⁴ Glagula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 73.

insurgent forces and his political organization in a given area, but also, Glagula emphasized, the “permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population.”⁵⁵

Glagula addressed tactics also. He stated that a force needs a great deal of infantry with high mobility, and he mentions the need for armored cavalry. He emphasized the need for prior training in and orientation to the concept of counterinsurgent warfare. He also mentioned prophetically that while destruction of the guerrilla is “highly desirable,” it must not become an end in itself because the guerrilla nature is similar to a hydra: it will always grow more heads.⁵⁶

Glagula also presaged area operations, with a joint civil-military emphasis on a counterinsurgency, by outlining steps for operations against insurgents. The first step was destruction or expulsion of the insurgent forces, followed by the second step, deployment of the static unit (augmented with mobile reserves until the area was calm enough to not require them). Step three was to maintain contact with and control of the population, while step four was destruction of the insurgent political organization. The fifth and sixth steps were political: local elections and testing the local leaders, respectively. The seventh step was organizing a party, and the last step was winning over or suppressing the last guerillas, and he even recommended using massive forces to accomplish this, for a variety of reasons.⁵⁷

Perhaps the best definition of an insurgency is provided in the work by Donald Hamilton. After discussing the many possible definitions for the term, he stated that “insurgency is a political-military conflict waged against a specific faction(s), implementing irregular military actions in support of a unified political outcome, short of

⁵⁵ Glagula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 77.

⁵⁶ Glagula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 107.

⁵⁷ Glagula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 107 to 133.

revolution or civil war.” The definition was then further discussed. He felt that insurgencies in and of themselves were not revolutionary events, but that insurgencies could ignite revolutions, or, as a *type* of war, could be part of a larger conventional conflict or a revolution.⁵⁸ From a broader perspective, Hamilton argued that the U.S. needed to have a formal doctrine that addressed insurgencies, rather than counterinsurgency theories. His belief was that the theories on insurgency produced after 1945 were never more than “marginally effective” in their conventional and unconventional approaches to guerilla operations. He believed that counter-guerrilla operations were integrated into mainstream doctrine without a complete understanding the true definition of an insurgency.⁵⁹

Still others felt that the war in Vietnam was a revolutionary war – a three-phased war whose roots were based on the works of Mao, which was the definition that the Army adopted. The 1973 Division Cavalry Manual, as an example, took formal doctrinal position on it and defined it. In the chapter on stability operations, it stated that an insurgency had three phases, and that “the distinguishing feature of stability operations is the nature of the enemy.” It said that a communist-led insurgency had three stages: 1) is the latent or incipient insurgency; 2) is organized guerilla warfare, and 3) is a war of movement. The first two phases were primarily characterized by small-unit actions, mainly of raids and ambushes. By Phase III, it became a war of movement between the insurgents and their enemy, meaning that the insurgents had reached enough strength to

⁵⁸ Donald Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency: American Military Policy and the Failure of Strategy in Southeast Asia*. (Westport, CT : Praeger, 1998), 21.

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency*, 7.

be confident enough to stand and fight, and even mount mobile warfare against their enemies.⁶⁰

Yet another influential camp believed in fighting guerillas with guerillas, including the late and distinguished Colonel David Hackworth.⁶¹ He stated that “to defeat the guerilla, we must become guerillas. Every insurgent tactic must be copied and employed against the insurgent.” The famous author Bernard Fall saw things the same way. He felt that “the patiently trained jungle fighter” will stay in the jungle and “out-stay” the enemy if need be; that the answer was not with mass-produced soldiers geared for a conventional war like the Korean War.⁶²

In any event, the true nature and understanding of an insurgency were perhaps not fully grasped by anyone in the U.S. – not the military, the policy-makers in Washington, nor academia. While there were theories and ideas as evidenced by the work of David Glagula and others, there did not seem to be agreement as to which theory of insurgency was the correct one. In the end, the revolutionary model of insurgency was adopted, as finally reflected in the 1973 Division Cavalry Manual’s chapter on stability operations.

Regardless of the debate over the nature, composition, and motivations of an insurgency, the enemy was multi-layered. It was composed of Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars. The largest enemy units were main force units – the battalions, regiments, or divisions of NVA or VC, said by some to be interchangeable. The main force units were well armed and equipped, and lived and operated largely

⁶⁰ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-1.

⁶¹ There still is much disagreement on the topic as to why the U.S. lost the war, or how it could have been fought better. Options ranged from sealing off the borders of the country to allow the pacification to take place inside more effectively, to starting pacification earlier, to denying border sanctuaries earlier, to invading North Vietnam, and on and on, or any combination of these. Others feel that the war was mainly lost by the South Vietnamese.

⁶² Ltc. Bradford, “U.S. Tactics in Vietnam,” 66.

separate from the population by moving from jungle base to jungle base. Their tactics were to attack at a time and place of their choosing, inflict as much damage as possible, then break contact and withdraw back into the jungle to live to fight another day. A 1967 After Action Report stated that “although they are masters of guerrilla warfare, main force units pose their principal threat to American units in more conventional, large-scale combat between two regularly organized and equipped military forces.”⁶³

Another layer was the local guerrillas. The VC guerillas generally lived among the people, in hamlets and villages, and in nearby base camps. Their main missions were to harass units by implementing small-unit ambushes, emplacing mines, and booby traps. At the same time, when operating in small squad and platoon-sized units, they were capable of threatening a U.S. platoon-sized unit, or “doing serious damage” to a company. In other roles, guerrillas acted as guards and armed enablers for any local Viet Cong political infrastructure, and scouts for main force units. In general, because of their familiarity with a particular area, they acted as the “eyes and ears” for both the main units, gathering intelligence for their cause.⁶⁴

Still another layer was the provincial battalions, considered the “elite” of local guerillas. Organizationally, they belonged between the main forces and the local guerillas. Their armament and combat power was similar to the combat power of the equivalent North Vietnamese unit, but a main difference, which was a big advantage, was that the provincial battalions had good knowledge of the area they operated in since the

⁶³ Operations Report Lesson Learned (ORLL) 6-67, “Observations of a BDE Commander,” S2D4B2, #3, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 5. Colonel Berry, whose observations are contained in the report, was an Infantry Colonel, and passed on his observations from commanding 1st BDE, 1 ID from June 1966 to February 1967. He states that his unit fought two kinds of Viet Cong forces: main forces and local guerrilla units, but occasionally encountered VC provincial battalions (which combine the characteristics of main force battalions and local guerrillas), and North Vietnamese Army regiments. He makes the point that his unit had to be prepared to meet any of these.

⁶⁴ ORLL 6-67, 6.

members came from the area in which they operated. This made them very lethal – posing a “double threat” – a weighty, conventional-style ability, coupled with knowledge and ability to conduct guerillas operations.⁶⁵

To counter the layers of the enemy, there was a layered structure for the South Vietnamese forces, which consisted of four branches: regular forces, militia forces, paramilitary forces, and self-defense forces. The Army of Vietnam (ARVN) were the regular forces, made largely in the image of the U.S. Army. The militia forces consisted of the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). The RF usually operated in a central location at company strength and operated within their region. The PF were usually platoon size forces and operated closer to their home villages. They operated under civil authorities against VC infrastructure, or joined ARVN forces on larger operations. The paramilitaries consisted of police units that the U.S. trained, and the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) that operated mainly with Special Forces out of base camps along the landward border of Vietnam. A last layer was the People’s Self-Defense Force – composed of many civilians young and old, infirm or otherwise on notice to take up arms should the need arise. By 1969, they were estimated to be one million strong.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ ORLL 6-67, 7.

⁶⁶ LTG Frank Mildren, “In Charge – All the Way,” *Army* (October 1969) : 99.

CHAPTER III

ARMORED CAVALRY EXECUTION IN VIETNAM

The deployment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam in 1965 added another, powerful layer. The deployment occurred only after U.S. leadership determined that the South Vietnamese could not hold off both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese on their own. The plans for U.S. forces' initial missions were defensive in nature, and were purposely limited to three basic missions: security, enclave, and later, "search and destroy." The first two of these missions did not plan for the use of armor. The security mission was for the airfields from which bomber missions against North Vietnam were launched. This mission grew to the second, an enclave mission, whereby more ground was procured in order to protect larger areas than just airfields. In the summer of 1965 the situation literally expanded further when permission was granted for U.S. forces to go after the enemy anywhere necessary. Once General Westmoreland, commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), received permission to use troops anywhere in the country, he personally began to determine which and what types of units to deploy to Vietnam. Even at this juncture of widening U.S. involvement, armored units were still not seriously considered because of lingering misconceptions.⁶⁷

The circumstances under which armored vehicles were deployed to Vietnam were illustrative of the debate surrounding their practicality in Vietnam, which included the

⁶⁷ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 55.

myths about their use as well as considerations of doctrine. In 1965 the first troops to Vietnam were Marines and the 173rd Airborne Brigade – units that required less logistical support, were quicker to deploy, and sent a message that a stay in Vietnam was not to be long in duration.⁶⁸ With these ground troops to Vietnam came armored vehicles - by accident. When Marines were deployed in 1965, the MACV planners who requested them did not realize that the Marine battalion landing team had its own tanks. When the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam learned of their deployment, he was surprised and less than pleased, and referred to these heavy vehicles as “not appropriate for counterinsurgency operations.”⁶⁹ Upon hearing that the heavy vehicles had landed, even General Westmoreland was “piqued.”⁷⁰ A further illustration involving the 1st Infantry Division was best recounted by retired General Don Starry in his book, *Mounted Combat In Vietnam*, perhaps the definitive work on all mounted forces involvement in Vietnam. When the division was designated for deployment to Vietnam, it was told not to bring either tank battalion, among other equipment. The decisions for this were made by the Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, who overruled a request to bring at least one tank battalion. General Johnson’s reasons for rejecting the use of armor are illuminating. He referred to the deterrent factor of anti-tank mine use as demonstrated by the Korean War, and the fact that there would be “an absence of major combat formations in prepared positions.” He referred to some of the experiences of the South Vietnamese in their fights against the enemy, saying that he had seen little evidence that

⁶⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 54-55. General Starry wrote *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* based on the results of a study while he was stationed at Fort Knox, as the Commanding General. This work is the official history of mounted units in Vietnam, including armor, and mechanized infantry. Previously, he commanded the 11th ACR in Vietnam. The papers he used to write his book are in the Armor in Vietnam Collection in the Patton Museum, Fort Knox, KY.

⁶⁹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 55.

⁷⁰ Andrew Krepinovich, *The Army and Vietnam*. (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 141.

they had been requesting their tanks. Further, he said that tanks would slow down the movement of other troops, and would also send the wrong message. Tanks, according to him, would establish an atmosphere of “conventional combat” reminiscent of the French.⁷¹ However, in the end, he allowed 1-4 Cav, the divisional cavalry squadron of the 1st Infantry Division (1 ID) and the first deployed to Vietnam in October, 1965, to bring its M48A3 tanks for test purposes, and pending the results of this test, he was prepared to allow the division to deploy one of its tank battalions to Vietnam. When General Westmoreland got word of General Johnson’s decisions with regard to the use of armor with the deployment of the 1st ID, he stated that “except for a few coastal areas, most notably in the I Corps area, Vietnam is no place for either tank or mechanized infantry units.”⁷² In the end, the cavalry squadron deployed with the division with modified M113’s armored personnel carriers, and their 27 M48A3 tanks.

Deploying was only the first in a series of hurdles imposed on the cavalry. Once in country, the squadron was parceled out, with each of the three ground troops going with one of the 3 brigades of the 1st ID to different locations. This practice was known as detachment. It was not until six months later that the squadron operated together as a whole. Additionally, General Westmoreland still saw no use for the tanks so all of their M48A3 tanks were withdrawn and impounded in a motor pool until the commanding general of the division and the cavalry squadron commander could convince Westmoreland to release them. As if that was not enough, the Air Cavalry Troop which belonged to the cavalry squadron was parceled out in pieces to whoever needed their

⁷¹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 56.

⁷² Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 56.

services and it was not until other air cavalry troops were observed operating together efficiently that 1-4's air cavalry troop was able to end this practice.⁷³

The actions of the Army's leaders show the state of mind among the senior leadership of the U.S. Army at that time regarding the use of armored forces in Vietnam. They were clearly convinced of the disutility of mounted forces for the conflict in Vietnam, for a variety of reasons. Many were related to the mythology of Vietnam which collectively resulted in a belief that mounted forces either could not, or would not perform well there, whether because of the nature of fighting an insurgent enemy, or because of the difficult, non-armor friendly jungle terrain. Others may have still been holding out hope that the ARVN would not need the help of conventional U.S. forces; that augmentation with advisors and Special Forces would suffice. It was also possible the planners hoped that incremental deployments of conventional forces might deter the enemy from further attacks without the U.S. ever having to deploy additional mounted forces. It is still further possible that an institutional infantry-centric mindset delayed visualizing, and thus planning and preparing for armored forces deployment in a counterinsurgent environment, and as a result, armored forces were not trained adequately for it. This knowledge may have caused further hesitancy among the planners. Another may have been lack of desire to stay in Vietnam very long because of political considerations, and understandably, sending armor and mounted forces would have conveyed politically undesirable connotations of permanence. One can clearly see through the gradual escalation in the missions and deployments of U.S. troops to Vietnam that it was hoping that with each increment, it might be enough.

⁷³ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 58.

As Starry further mentioned there were other considerations with regard to the generals' mindset. One was that tank/armored units required a much larger logistical infrastructure for their support than did dismounted infantry, and at the outset of the Vietnam this was undesirable in the minds of the planners. Additionally, the increase in logistical overhead would in turn require more assets to secure them, which was also undesirable.⁷⁴ It appeared that the early planning phases for troop deployments to Vietnam were weighted toward a rapid and uncomplicated deployment – getting there first with the most. It also appeared that from the outset, the deployment of ground troops in general to Vietnam was done without a long-term plan or vision, given that one can clearly see a mission escalation from security, to enclave, to “search and destroy,” as well as an escalation in troops and equipment. Another reason for confusion in deployment lay in the “tug-o-war” between deploying for counterinsurgency, or a mid-intensity, conventional-style war.⁷⁵ The latter won.

Early in Vietnam, ground cavalry units underwent steep learning curves, partly because of a lack of preparation and training prior to arriving in Vietnam. As was mentioned earlier, for various reasons it was never part of the long term plan to employ armored cavalry units to Vietnam, and this affected training and preparation. As an example of this, when 1-4 cavalry deployed to Vietnam, they had had only two weeks of unit training prior to departure. This was due in large part to the fact that the squadron, not expecting to deploy, had sent many of its most experienced people to a different

⁷⁴ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 56.

⁷⁵ Krepinovich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 151.

brigade in the 1st Infantry Division that was deploying. Hence, they were depleted of experienced personnel.⁷⁶

Despite their unplanned deployment and relative lack of preparedness, armor and cavalry began proving their worth in the jungle and the doubters began to change their minds. General William DePuy, an early naysayer of armored cavalry's worth in Vietnam, became an advocate.⁷⁷ When he took over 1st Infantry Division, he regularly used armor and cavalry to locate the enemy. The commanding general of the 25th Infantry Division, which deployed after the 1st ID, insisted on deploying with his armor. Meanwhile, others quietly went about finding uses for armored cavalry. In April 1966, Colonel Harold Moore, a battalion commander in the 1st Cavalry Division in the famed Ia Drang Valley fight, and later the commander of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), formed Task Force Spur in order to move an artillery unit through 20 kilometers of nothing but solid jungle. The unit was escorted by Troop C, 3-4 Cavalry, in conjunction with air cavalry providing reconnaissance. The tanks led the way, providing security and literally crushing a path through previously unexplored jungle.⁷⁸

Early Cavalry Operations

Cavalry quickly began to become a multi-purpose unit, not just focused on trinity missions. From the period of September, 1965, to 30 May, 1966, they performed a litany of missions. The main missions were route security, convoy security, "search and destroy" operations (with infantry battalions), and blocking positions. It was also found that they were best employed to clear paths through the jungle, and serve as a rapid

⁷⁶ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 57.

⁷⁷ After the war, General DePuy perhaps became best known for being the first commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), and the driving force behind the first major post-war doctrine, FM 100-5, Operations, which came out in 1976.

⁷⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 65-66.

reaction force. It was also clear early on cavalry troops were sometimes detached for service with infantry battalions. They were particularly useful in this method. The cavalry vehicles flattened paths through the jungle vegetation and helped detonate mines, both for the following infantry, and then lead the way through any enemy base camp found, imparting shock effect, and setting up blocking positions on the far side. Other positive contributions were that their vehicles were more readily visible from the air, making it easier for airborne leadership to assist with command and control, and land navigation. Early on the cavalry became a hot commodity.⁷⁹

One of the first fights involving cavalry was at the village of Ap Bau Bang, in November 1965. Troop A of 1-4 Cavalry was part of a task force composed of infantry, whose mission had been to secure safe passage for a South Vietnamese Regiment and an artillery battery. Encamped the night after ensuring safe passage along the route, the U.S. forces were attacked by Viet Cong assaults. Six hours later, the battle was over. Though the cavalry had suffered casualties, the perimeter of the defense had held; they had beaten off the enemy attack. This fight was one of the first demonstrations of the effects of cavalry's firepower on the enemy.⁸⁰

In June and July of 1966, events heated up when the 1st ID moved north into an area known as War Zone C, a big VC sanctuary area northwest of Saigon that bordered Cambodia. The move into War Zone C was to accomplish several tasks, including opening Highway 13, which ran north/south, and to conduct "search and destroy"

⁷⁹ Armored Cavalry Operations in Vietnam Memo, 7 June 1966, S2D3, #87, 2-4.

⁸⁰ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 63. The cavalry's actions at Ap Bau Bang also illustrated a change from defensive doctrine. Normal doctrinal deployment in the defense called for dispersion in order to prevent making a large target for the enemy. However, in Vietnam, because of the enemy's relative inability to threaten U.S. forces with air or large caliber artillery, and the fact that they were dispersed all throughout an area, U.S. forces set up night defensive positions with tight perimeters that gave 360-degree protection.

missions against elements of the 9th Vietcong Division. For their part, 1-4 Cavalry conducted “search and destroy missions,” reconnaissance in force missions, and convoy escort and security. These missions became perhaps the most familiar of missions conducted by cavalry and other maneuver units during the war, and were major variations of the trinity missions of reconnaissance and security. By the end of the series of operations in September, the 1st ID had engaged in five major engagements, driving the 9th VC Division back to sanctuaries in Cambodia after they suffered 850 killed. 1-4 Cavalry played a major role in the 1st ID’s success in three of the five engagements, and tactics were refined as a result of experiences.⁸¹

While looking for the enemy and during the process of securing Highway 13, the first engagement occurred, the Battle of Bench Mark 69. While moving on the highway on June 8, Troop A, 1-4 Cavalry encountered an enemy ambush and fought it off, killing over 100 of the enemy. They were able to inflict high casualties because of the combined firepower of the tanks, ACAVs, artillery, and air strikes.⁸² Out of the ambush came improved techniques, including using supporting fires from artillery and air to keep the enemy pinned in the area after the ambush, not allowing him room to maneuver or escape. Also, the idea of using airmobile infantry as the reaction force to cut off the enemy and help beat off the main attack was refined.⁸³

The next engagement was the battle of Srok Dong 1 on 30 June, which took place on Highway 13. A deception plan was released to make the enemy think that there would only be less than one troop conducting a reconnaissance, when in actuality there were

⁸¹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 66.

⁸² Operational Lessons Learned, 1-4 Cavalry, S2D4B2, #5, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 1 May – 31 July 1966, Undated, 7.

⁸³ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 67.

actually Troops B and C of 1-4 Cavalry with an attached rifle company. They were attacked by dug-in Viet Cong while conducting a reconnaissance in force on Highway 13, en route to secure engineer equipment.⁸⁴ When Troop B was hit first, Troop C was able to maneuver and reinforce, holding off the main attack. Meanwhile, the cavalry, in conjunction with artillery, air power, and an airmobile infantry reaction force, beat off the attack of the enemy and forced them to withdraw. While withdrawing, the enemy was harassed and engaged by these follow-on forces. At the end of the day, the enemy lost approximately 270 dead, and a number of weapons were captured.⁸⁵

The success of these operations encouraged General DePuy to bait the enemy into an ambush on 9 July, 1966. The demonstrated firepower, mobility, and protection of the cavalry made them an acceptable candidate for bait. The mission was actually classified as a reconnaissance in force “to lure forces to ambush/attack the column, enabling the 1st Brigade to destroy VC forces by offensive action.”⁸⁶ The Task Force that was to carry it out was named DRAGOON, and was composed of Troops B and C, 1-4 Cavalry, and a company of infantry. The bait worked, and at the end of the day, 240 of the enemy were dead, with minimal U.S. losses. This particular incident was significant in that it represented a de facto execution shift from doctrine. Armored forces were now the fixing forces while the infantry was the maneuver (encircling) force, contrary to established practice, which was usually the other way around. Armored forces’ firepower enabled them to immediately return devastating fires on the enemy, fixing the enemy in place, while their armor aided in their surviving the ambush. Thus, they made good bait. New

⁸⁴ Report, “The Campaign Along National Route 13,” S2D4B2, #11, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 3.

⁸⁵ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 67.

⁸⁶ 1-4 Cavalry Report, “Activities of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, Jun-Jul 66,” S5D2B1, #67, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, Battle of Minh Thanh Road, 4.

doctrine came out of all of this action as well – the herringbone formation, which 1-4 Cavalry is credited with inventing. The herringbone formation is still part of U.S. armor and cavalry doctrine today.⁸⁷ For their actions during this time period, known at the Highway 13 Campaign, 1-4 Cavalry was later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, in recognition of their contributions and performance.

Statements by the 1-4 Squadron Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel LeWayne, reveal much about the state of cavalry operations in October 1966. He discussed the terms “search and clear,” and “search and destroy,” and says that they are synonymous. Both meant that a designated area was searched for enemy, installations, and material, and were destroyed when found.⁸⁸ These terms characterized the bulk of cavalry reconnaissance missions for the duration of the war in Vietnam, and represented a shift in execution from the doctrinal trinity mission of reconnaissance.⁸⁹

At that time, the missions of the 1-4 Cavalry that most closely resembled the trinity reconnaissance missions were labeled reconnaissance in force missions, “search and clear,” and “search and destroy” missions. Reconnaissance in force was doctrinal, and described in the 1965 Division Cavalry manual as “a limited objective operation by a force of sufficient size to discover and test the enemy’s dispositions and strengths, or to

⁸⁷ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 71. The herringbone is a battle drill, a drill that happens instantly when the need arises. The herringbone formation is when a column of vehicles that are traveling, usually along a road, suddenly stop and every other vehicle pulls off the opposite side of a road, facing outward. In this fashion, the road is cleared, and weapons are instantly deployed outwardly, equally on both sides of the road, while usually the most protected part of the vehicle (the front) is facing a potential enemy, thus also offering a smaller target. Further, other vehicles can still travel along the road.

⁸⁸ 1-4 Cavalry Unit SOP, October 1966, S2D3B1, #69, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, “Questions for 4th Cavalry,” 1.

⁸⁹ Operational Report Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1st ID, S2D4B2, #5, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, Undated. P. 82. Proof of the preponderance of “search and destroy” missions conducted by the division during a 90-day reporting period, which included the campaign along Highway 13, listed “search and destroy” as the category of mission most overwhelmingly represented in terms of friendly casualties. Under that mission category for the period, there were 493 killed in action, and 2392 wounded in action. The next closest category was defense, with 61 and 406 respectively, followed by convoy with 42/288, and patrol, 41/177.

develop other intelligence.” However, unlike the other traditional trinity reconnaissance missions, such zone, area, and route reconnaissance, reconnaissance in force was not discussed again anywhere else in the manual, at any level, platoon, troop, or squadron. It was more a broad, encompassing term.

This what the terms “search and clear” and “search and destroy” became as well, in execution – broad, encompassing terms. They were new, broader terms that reflected truly new missions for the cavalry. Because they were broad terms, they presumably rested on a myriad of sub-tasks. Some were relatively new sub-tasks, such as blocking force, sealing force, attachment to infantry, or in the role of breaking the jungle for other units. Among these, blocking force was found in a small paragraph in the 1965 doctrinal manual, whereas breaking jungle and sealing force missions were not; hence, they were new to the cavalry. Other newer sub-tasks included destroying the infrastructure found, such as tunnel complexes and bunkers, with either gun fire or with demolitions. Other tasks that made up the broader terms such as “search and destroy” were not new, such as movement to contact and other basic battle drills such as actions on contact. Ultimately, the broad terms such as “search and destroy” rested on a collection of sub-tasks, some new and others not, that were a blend of doctrinal and new missions. Terms such as “search and destroy” were overarching covers laid over various collections of these sub-tasks. At the conclusion of the operations in War Zone C, perhaps the best summation of cavalry’s mission was “finding, fixing, developing the situation, and killing VC,” with the end goal of maintaining contact as long as possible in order bring to bear more firepower and thus kill more of them.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ 1-4 Cavalry Unit SOP, October 1966, S2D3B1, #69, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 4. On page 2 of the intelligence portion later, it states that the “Cavalry Squadron as a whole is

What this early campaign in the summer of 1966 showed was that versions of trinity reconnaissance missions were becoming sub-tasks, used as necessary, under new, broader and overarching terminology. An example of this was one of the main doctrinal reconnaissance terms used in Vietnam, reconnaissance in force. The 1-4 Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) said that reconnaissance in force's primary objective was the "detection, engagement, and defeat or capture" of any VC unit encountered. Additional information on terrain and trafficability, part of the focus of the trinity reconnaissance tasks of zone, area, and route reconnaissance, was accomplished incidentally along the way. Later, the SOP reiterated that reconnaissance in force was *the* term used, to the exclusion of limited objective attacks, or raids. The SOP states that "raids, as such, are seldom conducted." The minimum size of the unit conducting the reconnaissance in force was usually a cavalry troop, augmented by an infantry company that rode on the cavalry's vehicles, and supported by engineer mine teams, air cover, and artillery.⁹¹ It appeared that of all the trinity reconnaissance terms, this one was arguably the most accurate in describing what cavalry was doing.

Reconnaissance in force, the last bastion and "distant cousin" of the trinity mission of reconnaissance that arguably applied in Vietnam directly, was defined differently in Vietnam. One description of it from the time stated that it was "a typical search and destroy mission" that was conducted in three phases: isolation of the enemy, mounted sweeps through the area, and lastly the dismounted, detailed search.⁹² From this

usually employed in VN as a find, fix, and eliminate force. The Air Cav is utilized by the squadron for flank security, route reconnaissance, recon by fire for possible ambush sites, and command and control."

⁹¹ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 3.

⁹² Major William B. Blake, "Missions and Techniques of Employment of Ground Armored Cavalry Units in Vietnam." (Ft. Leavenworth, KS : U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, March 1973), 3.

definition, it was evident that reconnaissance in force had moved to reflect a description of a “search and destroy” mission – a new mission. This new, real world definition of it, when compared with the definition from the Division Cavalry manual of 1965, which is very brief – only at the front of the manual, and not at all found in the section on Reconnaissance Operations, is illustrative. The manual stated that reconnaissance in force was “a limited objective operation by a force of sufficient size to discover and test the enemy’s dispositions and strengths, or to develop other intelligence.”⁹³ This was evidence of a doctrinal term – reconnaissance in force-- shifting in meaning by adopting the definition a description of an entirely new mission being conducted in Vietnam – the “search and destroy.”

There were two other interesting aspects about reconnaissance in force. One was that most reconnaissance in force missions began as meeting engagements. Meeting engagements, as defined by a later seminar on the topic, were “the combat action that occurs when a moving force, incompletely deployed for battle, engages an enemy force, static or in motion, concerning which it has inadequate intelligence.”⁹⁴ It appeared that once intelligence was gained regarding a suspected enemy location, forces went to that location, and a meeting engagement happened either en route, or upon arrival at the suspected location. According to a later study, “the typical engagement of the enemy by all types of U.S. forces occurs at pointblank range in dense forest.”⁹⁵

Another was the de facto repudiation of one of the traditional, trinity-based fundamentals of reconnaissance – to avoid decisive contact with the enemy. In the case

⁹³ FM 17-36 Division Cavalry 1965, 7.

⁹⁴ “Extracts From Report of the Meeting Engagement Seminar.” United States Army Vietnam (USARV), S2D3B1, #60, Armor In Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 14 September 1967, 4.

⁹⁵ MACOV Study, 55.

of Vietnam, because of the terrain and the elusive nature of the enemy, it was extremely hard to find the enemy in the traditional, conventional sense. The trinity version of reconnaissance, based on a conventional setting and a conventional enemy, held that scouts could acquire enemy vehicles at distant ranges, and vector fires or other killing maneuver forces onto them. In Vietnam, for the most part, the jungle terrain prevented this long range acquisition of the enemy and the luxury of staying hidden while doing so. Rather, U.S. forces generally found the enemy in many cases when the enemy fired on them. This resulted largely from terrain that offered an advantage to the insurgents – the ones who lived in the jungle and knew it well. Generally, engagements were initiated at the times and places of their choosing, at extremely short ranges, and U.S. forces were forced to react to the contact. While the U.S. mounted forces were not road-bound, when they did go off the roads it was either to patrol portions of an area of operations, or it was in response to intelligence as to enemy locations. Ultimately, the way they found the enemy was by running into them, which in itself was not in accordance with one the fundamentals of reconnaissance, to avoid decisive engagements. This was in direct contrast to “search and destroy,” which sought decisive contact.

Another unique affect that was noted in the 1-4 SOP was the importance of maintaining a presence, coupled with saturation patrolling. Saturation patrolling was a technique for conducting “search and destroy” missions while also maintaining a presence and learning the terrain. Saturation patrolling was reportedly brought to the 1st by its Commander, General DePuy. When conducting it, units would break down into sub-units, and search a particular area. Each sub-unit, in most cases, used a “cloverleaf” method, whereby each would circle out and around, each in a different direction, making

a shape resembling one of the leaves of a clover, and then all ended up back in the same place. The regrouped unit would then shift to another location and repeat the process. When contact was made, and the size, strength, and location of the enemy determined, artillery and air strikes were called in to help destroy the enemy.⁹⁶ Saturation patrolling was another example of a new term coined to characterize different execution, and different *intent* in Vietnam. Like “search and destroy,” it incorporated elements of other trinity tasks in the process, such as techniques of conducting area or zone reconnaissance. It was similar to “search and destroy” in this aspect.

Changes to the trinity missions of security were also happening, but differently from the changes to reconnaissance. The most common security missions for the cavalry at that time and in that area of operations were route clearing / securing, and convoy security. Route security missions generally consisted of two phases. The first phase was route clearance, performed as a modified route reconnaissance, to make sure that the route had no mines, obstacles, or booby traps located on it, while the second phase was establishing and maintaining security of the route while in use. The first step of route clearance generally consisted of first positioning the troops, and second, clearing the road.⁹⁷ The second phase consisted of maintaining security along the route during the actual convoy. The second phase generally consisted of three steps: first, securing the route against ambush; second, running the convoy, and third, rolling up the forces.⁹⁸ The security consisted of holding sides of the road with infantry, who employed saturation

⁹⁶ 1st ID Division History in Vietnam, S2D4B2 #10, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY. Undated, Intelligence, 6. The 1966 1-4 SOP states that the presence of the cavalry most interfered with the enemy’s capability for mobility, by making the enemy realize that every time he is seen, he will be attacked, whether on the ground or from the air in artillery or tactical air. As a result of this knowledge, the enemy would go to great lengths to avoid being seen, thus greatly hampering his mobility.

⁹⁷ ORLL 6-67, “Observations of a BDE Commander,” 29.

⁹⁸ ORLL 6-67, 29.

patrolling techniques, while the convoys were escorted with armor. Armored cavalry troops could also be used in route security by establishing mutually supporting strongpoints along the route.⁹⁹

Armored cavalry's ability to conduct route security was greatly enhanced with attachments such as infantry, engineer mine sweeping teams, and demolition teams. Route security was usually conducted at troop level (with attachments), with clear guidance not to break down the troop below platoon level when conducting a convoy escort or when conducting reconnaissance down lateral routes. The SOP also noted that route reconnaissance in Vietnam greatly differed from the traditional idea of route reconnaissance in Europe because in Vietnam it was a "slow, tedious process," not like the school concept of rapid movement and engaging the enemy only when necessary."¹⁰⁰

Other new techniques were created. To reduce the vulnerability to ambush during a road march, 1-4 developed a technique known as the "compressed L formation," using a squadron with a company of infantry. One troop would lead the column, and one would be in the trail, and one in reserve. Moving with the trail troop was a company of infantry. When the enemy was encountered the lead troop cut down the intervals between vehicles and occupied a herringbone position. The infantry company, riding with the trail troop, dismounted and attacked up the column on one side of the road while the trail troop moved forward to herringbone with the lead troop. The attacking infantry moved forward along the road, while the trail cavalry troop "leapfrogged" forward by platoon or section in order to stay abreast of the infantry and not fire into them. If necessary, the reserve troop was committed, through the infantry, to the flank of the

⁹⁹ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, 2.

¹⁰⁰ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 1.

enemy, while an infantry battalion sent airmobile infantry to land at pre-selected landing zones to the flanks or rear of the enemy in order to seal them in a killing zone. The final statement regarding the description of the compressed L technique is an acknowledgement that doctrine had changed in this regard: “Armor has become the fixing force by virtue of its staying power and standoff distance. Infantry has become the maneuver force by virtue of its airmobility.”¹⁰¹

Air Cavalry

The story of the cavalry would not be complete without mention of the air cavalry, because ultimately the air cavalry’s abilities to conduct trinity cavalry missions in Vietnam arguably had an impact on the ground cavalry. The technology of the helicopter gave enormous mobility to U.S. forces in Vietnam. The creation of the air cavalry troop represented one of the best innovations of the Vietnam War. They were created organizationally by the ROAD reorganization of 1962, but the idea for their creation had roots in WW II airborne operations and in the limited but productive experience with the helicopter in Korea.¹⁰² Their doctrinal missions were the trinity, similar the ground cavalry. The 1962 definition of their mission was “to extend by aerial means the reconnaissance and security capabilities of ground (cavalry) units and to engage in offensive, defensive, or delaying actions within its capability of seizing and dominating lightly defended areas or terrain.”¹⁰³ Each Troop generally consisted of three platoons – an aeroscout platoon consisting of two sections, whose main job was aerial reconnaissance; an aerorifle platoon, whose main job was to conduct reconnaissance and

¹⁰¹ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, 5-6.

¹⁰² Lieutenant General John J. Tolson, *Vietnam Series, Airmobility: 1961-1971*. (Washington, D.C. : Department of the Army, 1973), 4.

¹⁰³ Lawrence H. Johnson, III, *Winged Sabers: The Air Cavalry in Vietnam*. (Harrisburg, PA : Stackpole, 1990), 15.

security missions with a rifle platoon consisting of four aerorifle squads of two fire teams each, that would typically fly in to particular locations to confirm or gather information on a particular location; and an aeroweapons section that would provide aerial fire support, air to ground fires, and provide security for the other scout elements of the troop.

¹⁰⁴ One air cavalry troop was part of each Divisional Cavalry Squadron, and one belonged to the Armored Cavalry Regiment. Additionally, there were air cavalry squadrons, such as 1-9 Cavalry, the Division Cavalry Squadron of 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

The air cavalry was critical to cavalry operations in many ways, but probably most critical in overcoming the limitations of jungle terrain. No ground movement was conducted without air reconnaissance. In the early days with the 1-4 Cavalry, the air cavalry was used primarily for flank security, route reconnaissance, recon by fire, and command and control. The 1-4 SOP stated that of the three usual types of reconnaissance, zone, area, and route, route recon is the most effective, but even that at times is limited by the dense jungle, particularly the overhead tree canopy. Reconnaissance quality was clearly affected by, above all things, the jungle-type terrain, with heavy undergrowth. The dense undergrowth was even to the point, in various areas, that ground reconnaissance was “less effective and far more time consuming.” The other frustrating and tough aspect of conducting reconnaissance was determining friend from foe.¹⁰⁵ As a comment on these tough aspects of reconnaissance in Vietnam, feedback in the 1-4 SOP stated that the current doctrine “leaned too far toward conventional-type warfare with open terrain and a distinguishable enemy.”

¹⁰⁴ ST 17-1-2, History and Role of Armor December 1971, 67.

¹⁰⁵ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 1.

Feedback in the 1-4 SOP on the air cavalry as they related to the trinity, was instructive. Feedback revealed that “basic doctrine and tactics are still the foundation of air recon; however, in guerilla warfare all tactics must modify (using) Lessons Learned, and now tactics are being forwarded to the U.S. daily and those should be compiled to form a basic guerilla warfare text.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the portion on air cavalry made little mention, proportionally, of conventional security missions such as guard, screen, or cover, or of economy of force. The only security mention referred to preempting enemy attack by firing on them first with air, as well as conducting flank security. Regarding economy of force for the air cavalry and the ground squadron, the notes stated matter-of-factly that economy of force missions such as offense, defense, or retrograde, “do not apply while offensive tactics are limited to find, fix, and eliminate the enemy.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, even the air cavalry found their trinity missions modified greatly by the peculiar demands of Vietnam, particularly the terrain and vegetation.

Early Conclusions

After about six months in combat, 1-4 Cavalry developed solid conclusions about the nature of their operations. The most frequent missions performed were security missions. They were performed mostly in the form of route security and convoy escort, and were not the trinity missions of screen, guard and cover. Route reconnaissance was a part of the overall route security mission, interweaving reconnaissance aspects with security. A lot of the emphasis on route security came from General Westmoreland’s directive calling for opening the roads, making them safe, and using them. Another Division Cavalry Squadron, 1-10 Cavalry of the 4th ID, conducted route security missions

¹⁰⁶ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 2.

¹⁰⁷ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 3.

for the majority of the time they were in Vietnam in II CTZ. During the first three months of 1967, they secured the passage of almost 8,000 vehicles across their CTZ without incident. A technique they used was to establish strongpoints along the route from which they could react, and if they did not have enough forces to do this, they would escort the convoys directly. The enemy caught on to the use of strongpoints, however, so as soon as 4th ID gained the services of another cavalry squadron, 1-10 changed their route security technique to consist of offensive patrolling missions within several kilometers of the main highway, which proved very effective.¹⁰⁸ Security missions were thus very different from the trinity versions of security. They became literal security missions, versus the trinity versions which emphasized protecting a main body of forces from attack or observation at a distance, oriented on front lines.

Reconnaissance was a necessary mission and was conducted with regularity, except that it was either called reconnaissance in force, “search and destroy,” or “search and clear,” all with the overarching mission of finding the enemy, fixing them, and destroying them. “Search and clear” missions were slightly different in intent, in that they were more terrain oriented and longer in duration than the reconnaissance in force. Their purpose was to clear all enemy out of the area, and secure the area against their return.¹⁰⁹ Reconnaissance in force, a doctrinal term most closely related to “search and destroy,” centered on finding the enemy, fixing him, and destroying him.

Reconnaissance in force helped counteract the nature of the enemy, and the nature of the terrain, which made it possible for the enemy to find excellent concealment and maintain the initiative by being able to launch attacks on U.S. forces largely at the time and place

¹⁰⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Blake, “Missions and Techniques of Employment,” iii.

of their choosing. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct reconnaissance loaded for bear, which is what the reconnaissance in force was. Overall, what was significant was that new mission terminology, such as “search and destroy” and “search and clear” reflected new missions, both of which reflected overarching intent. In the case of “search and destroy,” the intent was to find the enemy and his installations, and kill and destroy them, and to operate within those guidelines. For “search and clear,” it was to rid the area of the enemy, and maintain a presence to disallow his return.

Besides these new overarching mission terms, one other trinity reconnaissance mission, route reconnaissance, was probably the one conducted most often in accordance with the original doctrinal intent, with exceptions, particularly that the pace was a lot slower and that engagement of the enemy was expected, if not sought, rather than engaging “only when necessary.”¹¹⁰ The more traditional reconnaissance missions of the cavalry – zone and area - were seldom conducted in accordance with their original doctrinal intent, largely because they were terrain based, and stealth was hard with the close engagement ranges and the enemy’s potential to be anywhere.

Economy of force operations changed as well. In Vietnam, purely offensive and defensive missions were simply not done in the traditional sense. Defensive missions became security missions, night defensive position perimeters, or base and installation defense, whereby units protected themselves and others. When the enemy did possess the initiative and enough advantages to blatantly attack U.S. forces or installations, seldom was the weight of their forces enough to cause U.S. troops to have the need to defend for long, let alone conduct retrograde actions. Offensive missions overtook and arguably subsumed the reconnaissance missions. In fact, it is arguable that that was

¹¹⁰ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, Intelligence, 1.

where reconnaissance in the trinity sense really changed: reconnaissance, in Vietnam, became fused with offensive-type operations such as the “search and destroy.”

Doctrinally, economy of force missions were predicated on the notion that cavalry forces engaged the main portion of the enemy for the reason of buying time for the rest of the maneuver forces to achieve decisive effects elsewhere, but this was not regularly the case in Vietnam. The decisive point on the ground generally was wherever one found the enemy. However, as the war went on, operations were described in Vietnam as a country-wide economy of force, meaning that forces, particularly cavalry, conducted wide-ranging operations in portions of Vietnam, in order to free up infantry to operate in areas where mounted forces could not go.

Besides the experiences of 1-4 Cavalry during the summer of 1966, the early experiences of another cavalry unit, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), were instructive. The first and only U.S. ACR to serve in Vietnam arrived in September, 1966. The “Blackhorse” regiment, like the rest of mounted, armored forces, almost did not make it to Vietnam. It was originally requested in December of 1965 for the purposes of maintaining route security, no doubt based on the positive impact that the cavalry already in Vietnam was having. After wrangling between higher headquarters in Vietnam and the Department of the Army about what types of vehicles to substitute in an effort to make the force lighter, a structure was finally agreed upon to replace the tanks in the cavalry troops with M113 Armored Personnel Carriers. When modified, these vehicles became known as the Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles (ACAVs). The regiment was

composed of three ground squadrons, consisting of three cavalry troops and a pure tank company in each squadron. The regiment also possessed its own air cavalry troop.¹¹¹

1965 - 1966 Doctrine

One the eve of mounted forces deployment to Vietnam, armored cavalry doctrine was still focused on the Cold War fight in Europe. As an example, a field manual such as the October 1965 version of FM 17-36, Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units, followed basic patterns of Cold War convention. It stated the cavalry mission in the form of the trinity: armored and air cavalry units' missions were to "perform reconnaissance and to provide security for the unit to which assigned or attached, and to engage in offensive, defensive, and delaying action as an economy of force unit." It further described operations for a cavalry platoon in terms of reconnaissance, offensive, security, defensive, and delaying/retrograde operations.¹¹²

At the same time, the manual did acknowledge the conflict in Vietnam. At the squadron level, a chapter entitled "Special Operations" included 8 pages, under the sub-heading of "Counterinsurgency Operations." In it, the five types of offensive actions relating to "counterguerrilla" operations are listed as encirclement, raid, pursuit, ambush, and counterattack.¹¹³ These came straight from the 1962 Counterinsurgency Study almost verbatim, as did most of the rest of the 8-page section, so in that sense, the CI Study was heeded.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 72-73.

¹¹² FM 17-36, Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units October 1965, 5.

¹¹³ U.S. Army Armor Center Combat Developments Agency Study, "The Role of Armored Cavalry in Counterinsurgent Operations, 1962, Armor School Library, Ft. Knox, 7. In this, the Counterinsurgency study contradicts itself, and consequently the 1965 manual. The CI study states that "armored cavalry is marginal in encirclements and pursuits."

¹¹⁴ USAARCA Study, "The Role of Armored Cavalry in Counterinsurgent Operations," 1962, E-3.

The other remarkable aspect of this chapter was with regard to the missions that the manual lays out for armored cavalry against guerilla forces. They were: installation and community security; establishment of roadblocks; search and seizure of area; security of surface lines of communication, apprehension of insurgent forces, and area surveillance.” It was remarkable that these varying missions were not put into trinity categories. At the beginning of all cavalry manuals, the missions were stated in the form of the trinity, but in this case, there are six seemingly new missions in an obscure portion of an obscure chapter, not grouped according to the trinity. There was a list and little else, but it was a glimpse of what was to come.¹¹⁵

The next wave of armored cavalry/armor doctrine came out in 1966. In two of the manuals that came out that year, there were some additions to doctrine that reflected cavalry execution in Vietnam. FM 17-95, The Armored Cavalry Regiment, came out in May 1966, and FM 17-1, Armor Operations came out in October of that year. Regarding the former, it came out perhaps not early enough to reflect as many lessons learned from Vietnam, particularly those learned by 1-4 Cavalry during the summer of 1966; nor had the 11th ACR yet arrived in country.¹¹⁶ However, there were signs that the manual was beginning to recognize events in Vietnam.

¹¹⁵ FM 17-36, 1965, 196.

¹¹⁶ A line from the ACR manual of 1960, was that the armored cavalry can operate as “a light armor task force, without reinforcement, in security and light combat missions.” There is clearly still a trinity role, and is set in a conventional environment, but the emphasis is on “light.” By the 1966 manual, which is the next update, the reference to “light” is gone. The trinity is still alive and well with the 1960 manual. As envisioned in a Cold War, European setting, it may be envisioned that an ACR and other cavalry units would be able to acquire, reconnaissance-wise, the enemy out at long ranges and at least have the option of remaining stealthy, and more of an option of avoiding contact and decisive engagement. By 1966, with the realities of Vietnam, this emphasis is gone, a token reflection of reality. The reconnaissance fundamentals one of which is to avoid decisive engagement with the enemy, were curiously not found in the 1960 manual.

The 1966 ACR manual added a chapter on counterinsurgency, which stated that the cavalry may need to perform “internal security operations” such as securing key installations, operating mobile and static checkpoints, controlling civil disturbances, securing routes of communications, convoy escort, and other “constabulary-type missions,” patrolling for presence and psychological effect, and operating along the border to “interdict, deny, or keep under surveillance,” and to “prevent the use of an adjacent country as a sanctuary.”¹¹⁷ The chapter qualified border control operations by saying they would be conducted where the terrain allowed.¹¹⁸ In this list there were clearly some new missions, moving beyond the trinity. Some of the same missions appeared in the Armor manual that came out later that year. Missions in a counterinsurgency environment that the regiment was “particularly suited” to accomplish were the following: search and seizure of areas; harassing and elimination of insurgent forces by means such as saturation patrolling – mounted and dismounted – on terrain where the mobility of the cavalry can be exploited; and area surveillance. General types of offensive actions are listed as the encirclement, raid, pursuit, ambush, and counterattack, with the encirclement being the “most effective of all operations.”¹¹⁹

The other manual for armor and cavalry, FM 17-1, Armor Operations, came out in October, 1966. Though not explicitly a cavalry manual, it was doctrinally and

¹¹⁷ This was an example of tactical doctrine not in synchronization with national policy and strategy, since the cavalry and other forces were prevented from following their own doctrine in the sense that they could not “prevent the use of an adjacent country as a sanctuary” through direct ground action.

¹¹⁸ FM 17-95 The Armored Cavalry Regiment 1966, 125.

¹¹⁹ FM 17-95, 1966, 126. There were some anomalies in the trend of execution leading doctrine, however. In this instance, the new ACR manual came out in May 1966, and the 11th ACR arrived in country in September, 1966. Theoretically, the 11th ACR had time to digest this new doctrine, but in most cases most of the officers and leadership were not in school in time to have received this doctrine in a classroom setting. Thus, the only training they might have had that would reflect this doctrine was at the unit level, prior to departure. The bottom line is that their earliest execution in Vietnam does not reflect digestion of newer doctrinal terminology. Rather, with the exception of the overarching mission “search and destroy,” most all the other tasks and missions were described in trinity terms, such as area and route reconnaissance, and area security.

institutionally linked to the cavalry manuals, because cavalry officers were trained under the armor curriculum, and given additional training regarding the trinity missions.¹²⁰ The manual did a good job of trying to categorize operations in an insurgency environment, giving an overarching term to the operations in Vietnam, “Internal Defense Operations.” The manual further put actions to be conducted in an insurgent environment into two categories: strike operations, and clear, hold, and consolidation operations. The manual stated that strike operations were called by other names, such as “search and clear,” and “search and destroy,” “and others,” and that they were primarily tactical operations.¹²¹ It stated that the purpose of strike operations were to find, fix, and destroy insurgents, but that they could be used to harass the enemy as well. The manual went on to say that “strike operations are comprised of raids, reconnaissance in force, coordinated attacks, relief operations, or combinations of these.”¹²² This doctrine was an effort to put tactical operations into one category (strike operations), and then put all of the rest in another category, the clear, hold, and consolidate category. The clear, hold, and consolidate category later evolved into simply the “consolidation” category. In the 1966 manual, clear, hold, and consolidation, along with strategic hamlet operations and province rehabilitation programs and “others” were the “application of all aspects of the Host Country national internal development program.” The ultimate goal of the program was the restoration of “HC governmental control to the population and the area.”¹²³ It appeared that the clear, hold, and consolidate category was created to note the other important side of the war; essentially all else besides tactical operations. The manual in

¹²⁰ Cavalry and armor officers are given the same basic schooling, with officers designated to go to cavalry units receiving additional, trinity-related cavalry specific training.

¹²¹ FM 17-1 Armor Operations 1966, 221.

¹²² FM 17-1, 1966, 221.

¹²³ FM 17-1, 1966, 221.

effect acknowledged that strike operations were in reality a “sub-piece” – the first piece of ongoing and all-encompassing “consolidation.”

Then the manual marked a big doctrinal change by listing a whole host of missions that cavalry and armor could conduct. By doing this, the manual in effect began a “homogenization of missions” between maneuver units (armor and infantry units and task forces), and armored cavalry units, traditionally and doctrinally associated with trinity missions. This do-it-all mentality started with the description of strike operations, with such statements as “combinations of these,” and “and others.” This trend was begun earlier in the chapter on Internal Defense Operations, when the manual explicitly stated that “where brigade, battalion, and company are discussed in this section, it is equally applicable to the armored cavalry regiment, squadron, and troop unless otherwise specified.”¹²⁴ While the doctrine contained in this chapter was simply following execution in Vietnam, this statement was a de facto doctrinal endorsement of armored cavalry’s use in virtually any mission, including and beyond the trinity. They were becoming victims of their own success, from pariah status to jack of all trades. The doors were now opening wide.

The manual takes advantage of this, adding a dizzying array of missions and combat operations for armored forces in the “Internal Defense Operations” section. In the process of adding new missions and combat operations, the list got almost too long, and conveyed the impression that just about every mission or every contingency, in every circumstance, was listed. The chapter stated that within the two types of operations, strike, and clear, hold, and consolidate, there were six operation modes or activities: tactical operations against insurgent tactical forces, military civic action, internal security

¹²⁴ FM 17-1, 1966, 219.

operations, advisory assistance, psychological operations, and intelligence operations. It then listed 11 *specific tactical missions* that fell into the six modes or activities that armor (and armored cavalry) units could accomplish: 1) search and seizure of areas; 2) search and clearance of areas; 3) reaction force (reserve); 4) installation and community security; 5) security of surface lines of communication; 6) reconnaissance; 7) surveillance; 8) apprehension of insurgent force members; 9) harrassing and elimination of insurgent tactical forces; 10) convoy escort; and 11) border control.¹²⁵ To add to the plate, the chapter went further. The chapter described a list of ground armor unit *combat operations*, listing over twenty different combat operations. This was a sign that armored cavalry and regular maneuver units had multiple overlapping missions, and was further evidence of mission homogenization. Armor maneuver units were now doctrinally expected to conduct trinity-type missions, while armored cavalry was expected to conduct maneuver missions beyond the trinity.

The contents of the “Internal Defense Operations” section was the ultimate doctrinal reflection of execution based on experience in Vietnam, and it showed that armored cavalry’s mission expectations had indeed moved far beyond the trinity. The list of combat operations began with area organization, which laid out very well the nature of area operations – the method whereby a higher unit headquarters would parcel out responsibility for territory to the subordinate units, and they in turn would parcel out their territory to their subordinate units. It further listed mobile combat bases, static security posts, movement to contact, encirclement, attack and pursuit, search and clear, counterattack, ambush, counterambush, blocking position, raids, offense in cities and built-up area, security force in cities and villages, security of routes of communication,

¹²⁵ FM 17-1, 1966, 221-222.

convoy escort, reconnaissance and surveillance, inland water crossing, border control operations, psychological operations, and combat service support.¹²⁶ While this list was specific and comprehensive, it left the door open even wider. The manual stated as a preface to the list that “the operations, tactics, and techniques discussed may be employed in *varying degrees* by armor units in both strike, and clear, hold and consolidation operations.”¹²⁷ It appeared that this list was an attempt to codify doctrinally that fact that units in Vietnam were, to a large extent, conducting whatever the mission dictated of them. They were doing it all.

The exponential increase in missions and operations for armor and armored cavalry in a counterinsurgent environment was a possible indicator as to why the armored cavalry missions were expanding well beyond the trinity: because they *could*. There were repeated statements about armored cavalry in the manual, to the effect that because of their mobility, flexibility, combined arms organization, firepower, communications, and protection, armored cavalry units were well-suited for a counterinsurgent environment. This in turn may have been related to a reliance on technology, particularly firepower, to win a war where the terrain and the enemy frustrated a large part of conventional tactics and doctrine. There was also foreshadowing of another reason as to why this may have been possible, and that was that air cavalry, among others, was picking up the trinity role in lieu of ground cavalry. The chapter stated later that “air cavalry or other observation aircraft are the primary means for reconnaissance prior to an operation.”¹²⁸ It further said that the physical risks of ground reconnaissance must be

¹²⁶ FM 17-1, 1966, 223-242.

¹²⁷ FM 17-1, 1966, 223. To add confusion, however, the list of *combat operations* is not reconciled with the previously listed 11 *specific tactical missions*.

¹²⁸ FM 17-1, 1966, 224.

weighed against the level of detail needed, and that in most cases, aerial observation “must suffice.”¹²⁹

One last note on the 1966 17-1 Armor Operations manual was that it was one of the few manuals to actually list “search and destroy” (as one of the over twenty combat operations), and to discuss it. It stated that “search and destroy” fell under the banner of strike operations. It described strike operations as “variously called search and clear, search and destroy, and others, are primarily tactical operations.”¹³⁰ When specifically describing “search and destroy,” as one of the combat operations, it stated that it “combines the movement to contact with attack and search techniques to cover an assigned zone in which all insurgent forces must be captured or destroyed by offensive action.”¹³¹ Clearly, even in this definition there was ambiguity. No one term, or indeed no one combination of terms could define “search and destroy.” “Search and destroy” defied doctrinal description, which lead one to believe that it was a broad term and rested largely on intent for interpretation as opposed to specifics or one set of ways to conduct it.

Meanwhile, around the same time this doctrine was published, cavalry operations continued. One of the 11th ACR’s first operations in Vietnam was Operation HICKORY, 7-15 October, 1966. The operation involved the 3rd Squadron of the 11th ACR. The overall mission was “search and destroy,” as well as a security mission for engineers who were to check to make sure the area was safe. However, after action documents used the terms area and route reconnaissance, and area security, using more of the traditional trinity doctrinal terms in describing tasks to subordinate units. Perhaps this was a sign

¹²⁹ FM 17-1, 1966, 225.

¹³⁰ FM 17-95 The Armored Cavalry Regiment 1966, 221.

¹³¹ FM 17-95, 1966, 235.

that all the newer doctrinal terminology was not yet part of their mission terminology, meaning that they had not yet digested the new ACR manual. Or, as is more likely the case, since the unit had just arrived in country, they probably used doctrinal terms with which they were more familiar – missions expressed in trinity terms.¹³²

The regiment did not have to wait long for indoctrination into warfare, Vietnam – style. Soon the 11th ACR participated in Operation ATLANTA, which ran from 20 October 1966 into December of 1966. The overarching mission of ATLANTA was to clear and secure lines of communication near Saigon, while securing their new base camp. Another overarching task was to conduct a “search and clear” mission.¹³³ From ATLANTA the regiment made many discoveries. One was that at certain times they had all three squadrons conducting different missions; at no time were all squadrons operating together.¹³⁴ At one point, 1st Squadron was called away from ATLANTA to participate in Operation ATTLEBORO, a separate and unexpected operation. Another was that most of their missions were “search and destroy”/ “search and clear” operations, and various types of security such as base security and convoy security operations. They conducted cordon and search operations, in which squadrons sealed off areas and then drove the enemy out the area with combined mounted and dismounted operations.¹³⁵ Additionally, they discovered that within squadrons, subordinate units wound up conducting separate

¹³² Combined After Action Report (CAAR), Operation HICKORY 11th ACR, S3D1B1, 26 October 1966, 5-14. With the unit newly arrived in country, the mission was probably a true area reconnaissance in the trinity sense, to get familiar with the surrounding terrain, and to provide initial security in these areas. Also of note, there is no mention of any of the 5 offensive actions of the new ACR manual in describing their actions in Operation HICKORY. Plus the term “search and destroy” is *not* found in the May 1966 ACR manual. It might be possible that they used this term as part of word of mouth, or just used the term that best described what they were doing on the ground.

¹³³ Combined After Action Report (CAAR), Operation ATLANTA, S3D1B1, Undated, 1.

¹³⁴ CAAR, Operation ATLANTA, 1.

¹³⁵ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 74.

missions.¹³⁶ There was also a mix of mounted and dismounted operations. In sum, their missions were complex, varied, and simultaneous, and were either not trinity based, or were major variations of the trinity missions.

Additionally, during ATLANTA the regiment fought its first battle – the Battle of Suoi Cat. During this battle, while conducting route security, units of the regiment fought off enemy ambushes. The procedures used became the adopted standard in Vietnam-wide.¹³⁷ The procedures included having the ambushed element use its firepower to protect itself and the escorted vehicles, and then get them out of the killing zone. Once they were clear of the killing zone, the cavalry vehicles would return to the fight, while reinforcements came in from other ground cavalry elements, artillery, and close air support.¹³⁸ Overall, the experience of ATLANTA provided a taste of what was to come – multiple, varying, and simultaneous missions were the order of the day, and were very different from the conventional, trinity missions.

The Large Operations

1-4 Cavalry did not have much time to breathe after their missions during the summer. Up until the fall of 1966, they operated mainly with their parent division, the 1st ID, otherwise known as the Big Red One. Soon, 1st ID became embroiled in Operation ATTLEBORO, one of the first large-scale multiple-unit operations in Vietnam by U.S.

¹³⁶ CAAR, Operation ATLANTA, 6.

¹³⁷ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 75,78.

¹³⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 74-75. Curiously enough, while the most effective methods were being honed in Vietnam, as only experience can do in many cases, there are comments after HICKORY that give clues to idea that not all lessons learned were being passed around. The comment after HICKORY, prior to ATLANTA, is to “strive for infantry and armored cavalry combined arms operations.” While there is nothing wrong with point this out, it is interesting to note that 1-4 Cavalry found themselves using airmobile infantry in a reaction role, in much the same way, about six months earlier. It begs the question about how effectively lessons learned were passed around – how quickly, and in what form, or if at all. He states that “in many cases a quick reacting IN force such as a heliborne company could have accounted for considerable VC casualties.”

forces. Most of the fight took place in November of 1966, with the same 9th VC Division that the 1st ID sent reeling into the safety of Cambodia to lick its wounds a few months earlier. Newly recharged and refitted from their time in those sanctuaries, the VC re-emerged in force. The resulting fighting grew from one U.S. light infantry brigade involved to over 22,000 U.S. troops, composed of the 1st ID, elements of the 4th ID, the 25th ID, and the 11th ACR. As an example of how the 11th ACR was used during ATTLEBORO, 1st Squadron of the 11th ACR participated first under operational control of the 1st Infantry Division and later the command of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, while 2nd Squadron provided base security, and 3rd Squadron continued on a separate operation.¹³⁹

ATTLEBORO was not a fight that the U.S. had planned; rather, it grew in the response to discovery of enemy forces and supply caches. By the time it was over, 2,130 enemy were dead, with 155 friendly dead. The enemy also lost vast quantities of supplies captured and bases destroyed. The operation made a positive early statement about the value and power of the U.S. forces fighting role in an unconventional warfare environment, particularly mounted forces.¹⁴⁰ Perhaps a downside may be that the cavalry's early performance perpetuated a belief that all was well with doctrine; that conventional doctrine could work in a counterinsurgent environment, and therefore did not require much scrutiny as to validity or modification.

In early 1967 came Operations CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY, both of which were planned and initiated by the U.S., as opposed to being a reaction to the

¹³⁹ Combined After Action Report (CAAR), 11th ACR, Operation ATTLEBORO, S3D1B1, 08 December 1966, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Lieutenant-General Bernard William Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City: A Turning Point*. (Washington D.C. : Department of the Army, 1974), 12.

enemy. The purpose of Operation CEDAR FALLS was to destroy enemy forces and infrastructure within an area known as the Iron Triangle, only 25 kilometers northwest of Saigon, as well as to relocate civilians living within the Triangle. It was conducted in January, 1967, while Operation JUNCTION CITY ran from 22 February to 14 May, 1967. Both were significant because they were the largest operations of U.S. forces to date, but also because some of the missions that 1-4 Cavalry and the 11th ACR conducted as part of these operations were closest to their traditional, conventional trinity missions.

CEDAR FALLS was essentially a large scale “hammer and anvil” type operation, and was the largest combined operation in Vietnam to date. It involved the 1st ID, 25th ID, 173rd BDE, 196th IN BDE, 11th ACR, and ARVN units, with the 11th ACR and 173rd under operational control of the 1st ID. The concept of the operation was to position forces at one end as the “anvil,” and then the enemy was driven into them by another element, the “hammer.” The 1st ID was the driving force – the “hammer,” leading the “search and destroy” mission into the contested area. In addition, their tasks were tunnel and base camp destruction, and jungle clearing. It was a typical “search and destroy” operation of Vietnam, except on a much larger scale. The two squadrons of the 11th ACR participated mainly as the thrusting force from the south into the Iron Triangle, searching and destroying as they went, linking up with infantry units that had been airlifted into landing zones ahead of them and other infantry units that conducted “search and destroy” operations moving south.¹⁴¹ This was another example of maneuver units and cavalry units conducting the same missions. While both the cavalry and other maneuver units conducted some missions peculiar to their specialties (cavalry screening, infantry landing

¹⁴¹ After Action Report, Operation CEDAR FALLS, S2D4B1, #7, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY. March 13, 1967, 4-5.

by helicopter) both the 11th ACR units and infantry units were largely conducting the same overarching mission: “search and destroy.”

1-4 cavalry initially blocked and screened to the east, protecting the flank of the rest of the U.S. forces. These missions resembled the trinity security missions.¹⁴² Later the squadron was relieved of this mission and picked up a blocking mission in a new location, working under the control of the 11th ACR. Toward the end of the operation, 1-4 Cavalry, joined by two infantry companies, conducted jungle clearing operations, tunnel destruction, and security operations.¹⁴³ Thus, they conducted a wide range of operations. Operation CEDAR FALLS ended at the end of January, 1967, with much enemy destroyed, infrastructure razed, and jungle cleared. General DePuy, the commanding General of 1st ID, felt that the operation was a decisive turning point in the III CTZ, in favor of the U.S. and the South Vietnamese.¹⁴⁴ Colonel William W. Cobb, commander of the 11th ACR, felt that the regiment demonstrated its capabilities in conducting its missions of “search and destroy,” screening, blocking, and security missions.¹⁴⁵

Operation JUNCTION CITY ran from February to May, 1967. It was even larger than Operation CEDAR FALLS. The overall mission was “search and destroy” in order to eliminate the headquarters structure of the enemy thought to be in the area, known as the Central Officer of South Vietnam (COSVN). It took place in War Zone C, the approximately 80 x 50 kilometer area bounded by Highway 13 in the east and Cambodia in the west. It was the ground of the earlier operations of the 1st ID and 1-4 Cavalry the

¹⁴² Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City*, 25.

¹⁴³ After Action Report, Operation CEDAR FALLS, S2D4B1, #7, March 13, 1967, 5-8.

¹⁴⁴ Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City*, 78.

¹⁴⁵ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 95.

previous summer, and a place that was still considered to be an enemy stronghold, partly because it had been one for the previous twenty years. For the operation, 2 U.S. Divisions participated in addition to South Vietnamese troops.¹⁴⁶

Similar to Operation CEDAR FALLS, the concept of the operation was like a hammer and anvil operation, except that for this operation, blocking forces would set up in a giant horseshoe shape with other forces attacking into the mouth of the horseshoe. This was to be the first part, JUNCTION CITY I. The 1st ID was to be part of the horseshoe, forming its northern and eastern lengths. By the end of the operation, Viet Cong sanctuaries had been eliminated by destruction of their forces (each of the four enemy regiments of the 9th VC Division, mauled earlier by 1st ID) and their installations, while U.S. facilities were built in their place.¹⁴⁷

The missions of 1-4 Cavalry during Operation JUNCTION CITY I demonstrated how they had made a jump from doctrinal trinity missions, to becoming a “jack of all trades” in execution in Vietnam. 1-4 initially spearheaded the initial move of 1st ID into their area of operations, with missions of seizing and securing landing zones for the infantry, escorting and securing artillery units, and opening roads. Other missions were daily clearing of main supply routes, convoy escort of engineer units into their positions, blocking a portion of the supply routed from enemy access, and conducting their own search and destroy missions within their own area of operations.¹⁴⁸ By leading the division into the AO, the unit was performing a mission similar to trinity security mission, by acting as an advance guard mission. There were other conventional

¹⁴⁶ Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City*, 83.

¹⁴⁷ Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City*, 87.

¹⁴⁸ Combined After Action Report (CAAR), Operation JUNCTION CITY, 1-4 Cavalry, S2D4B1, #10, 19 April 1967, 2.

similarities, such as seizing terrain-based objectives, but in reality, it appeared that the majority of the operations were non-trinity security related tasks, plus the ever-present requirement for “search and destroy.”

After that, 1-4 Cavalry’s mission was to reinforce airborne elements along the northern portion of the horseshoe. In order to do this quickly, the squadron raced along 20 kilometers of uncleared road. The mission was officially termed an attack, in order to seize an objective, which they did, and linked up with elements of the 173rd Brigade. The mission was risky because of potential for mines, but turned out to be a successful mission. It was also a form of the trinity mission of route reconnaissance, since the squadron was followed by support elements.¹⁴⁹

The squadron’s missions continued to be a potpourri. For the next part of the operation, 23 February to 13 March, the squadron conducted road clearing and security; convoy escort, secured bases, conducted “search and destroy” missions, and extensive night patrolling. No contact of significance was made by the unit during the course of the operation. During Operation JUNCTION CITY II, 18 March to 15 April, they conducted perimeter security, road clearing operations, and convoy security, again encountering no significant contacts outside rocket propelled grenades and recoilless rifle fire.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the 11th ACR was part of the force attacking up into the mouth of the horseshoe. They conducted mainly “search and destroy” operations, plus blocking, screening, and security missions.

By the end of the operation, armored cavalry, in addition to mechanized and armored forces, had proved their worth in terms of being able to effectively control large

¹⁴⁹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 95.

¹⁵⁰ Combined After Action Report (CAAR), Operation JUNCTION CITY, S2D4B1, #10, 1-4 Cavalry, 26 April 1967, 3. The rocket propelled grenade was the RPG-2.

areas of War Zone C.¹⁵¹ Indeed, even North Vietnamese defectors commented that the loss of their bases and infrastructure [as a result of JUNCTION CITY] forced their command to realize that they could not maintain them in such close proximity to Saigon; rather, they decided that bases and camps needed to be relocated to the sanctuaries of Cambodia.¹⁵² Additionally, the significance of these successful large-scale operations was that it demonstrated their importance and their *possibility* in a counterinsurgent environment. The successful destruction of enemy forces and their sanctuaries, plus the subsequent construction of friendly bases, were major accomplishments. The enemy, who had been moving toward the Phase III of an insurgency, mobile warfare, now had to rethink his plans. The only problem noted at the conclusion of the operation was that there were not enough forces to stay in the area, because it was not long after the conclusion of the battle that enemy forces began to trickle back in. Further, even during a large-scale operation, the enemy could still get away because of jungle vegetation and usually intimate knowledge of the terrain; this meant that in many cases, the enemy still owned the initiative – that ability to strike and break contact at the times and places of his choosing.¹⁵³

From the point of view of the cavalry, the operations showed their ability to take part in large operations, akin to tradition conventional missions. While the cavalry performed well, however, these operations may have been in some senses misleading from a doctrinal viewpoint. The nature of the war in Vietnam was not conventional – the terrain was difficult, the enemy varied, and the front lines were virtually non-existent. The operations could only be conducted according to where intelligence showed that the

¹⁵¹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 102.

¹⁵² www.army.mil/cmhp-g/books/Vietnam/90-7/ch14.htm, 3.

¹⁵³ Rogers, *Cedar Falls – Junction City*, 157-158.

enemy was likely to be, and then once found, he could be destroyed. The large scale operations of CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY showed how the cavalry could modify, on a large scale, the traditional, conventional versions of their trinity missions, and simultaneously conduct missions outside the scope of trinity missions, but at the same time, it may be that leaders were convinced that the conventional doctrinal blueprint could be successfully modified to fit the nature of the war in Vietnam.

Immediately following JUNCTION CITY was Operation DALLAS, 17-26 May 1967. 1st ID and the 1st Squadron, 11th ACR were part of it. The operation was a “search and destroy” mission conducted in the western portion of War Zone D, just to the east of War Zone C. 1st Squadron’s mission statement was illustrative: “1st Squadron attacks north into sector, seizes, and secures two artillery support bases. Conducts combat reconnaissance in assigned areas of operation; destroys VC/NVA forces and installations in sector.” The Squadron was to first secure fire support bases, attacking into enemy territory to do so, and attacking because of the unknown enemy situation, expecting contact. Further, use of the term “combat reconnaissance” implied a reconnaissance in force or any of a myriad of missions, but the most important task in the mission statement was that they were to destroy VC/NVA forces and installations. As mentioned earlier, trinity versions of reconnaissance had become “search and destroy,” “search and clear,” and reconnaissance in force in Vietnam. They were broader terms that challenged definition, because just about every enemy or terrain situation was different. What was constant, however, was the need to find, fix, and destroy the enemy and his structures. The term “combat reconnaissance” was illustrative of the varying usage of terms used to describe the Vietnam versions of reconnaissance.

The descriptions of all the subordinate missions that the squadron conducted were even more illustrative. They showed that the squadron conducted the following troop and platoon sized missions during DALLAS: 1 multi-coordinated attack with 3 troops; 24 troop-sized “search and destroy” missions; 3 landing zone security missions; 3 parachute zone security missions; 1 troop size area recon; 1 troop size convoy escort; 1 troop size engineer work party security; 2 troop size route security missions; 2 troop size reaction missions; 7 platoon size search and destroy missions; 3 platoon size (composite) engineer work party security missions; 7 platoon size night route clearance missions (Thunder Runs), all for a total of 51 missions within the squadron. Elements on these missions made contact on 8 of the 51 missions, 6 were light contact, and 2 were moderate contacts, each lasting about 3 hours. Clearly, the cavalry units conducted many different missions simultaneously. This was a clear demonstration of the fact that the missions of the cavalry were a long way from conventional, trinity missions.¹⁵⁴ The reality in Vietnam was that the cavalry were conducting whatever missions were necessary within the bounds of their capabilities, which were considerable.

During DALLAS, 1-4 Cavalry conducted road clearing and security, convoy escort, security of a fire support base, and limited “search and destroy” operations. As part of conducting these missions, the squadron was again conducting multiple and simultaneous operations. For example, Troop A clear and secured a route; Troop B, with a platoon of infantry attached, cleared a route and conducted “search and destroy”

¹⁵⁴ CAAR, Operation DALLAS, 1/11 Cavalry, S3D1B1, #4, 29 March 1968, 1-4. The composite platoons were formed by taking tanks from the tank company and re-distributing them to certain troops and cavalry platoons. Remember that these platoons had given up their original task organization in order to come to Vietnam, replacing the tanks in the Cavalry Troops with M113s. Also, as one looks at these AAR comments, one might notice some groping for terminology. Such terms as “combat reconnaissance” can be figured out, but it is not per se doctrinal. It may have been unit Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

missions; Troop C cleared and secured routes and secured engineer work parties; an attached infantry company secured the fire support base, and conducted “search and destroy” operations.¹⁵⁵ These numbers illustrated both cavalry and maneuver units conducting some of the same missions, simultaneously and at multiple levels. In a conventional setting, it would not be this way.

The MACOV Study

During the same timeframe as CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY, the Army had officers and analysts in Vietnam seeking answers as to what was actually occurring on the ground in Vietnam. As part of the Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam Study (MACOV), over 100 military officers and civilian analysts were sent to Vietnam to gather data to find out during the period of January 1967 to March 1967. They were to discern whether particular patterns were developing regarding the use of mounted forces, tanks and armored personnel carriers, in Vietnam. Additionally, one the goals of the study was to evaluate the tactics, techniques, and operations of U.S. mounted forces (armor, armored cavalry, and mechanized infantry) in order to determine what changes needed to be made, if any, to doctrine and training.¹⁵⁶

The findings were many and substantial. Perhaps the most eye-opening findings related to the terrain. It found that armored vehicles could traverse terrain in Vietnam in more areas than previously believed, and during longer periods of the year, because the weather patterns were found to be different from other countries, such as Korea. It debunked the previous myth that the terrain was largely inhospitable to armored vehicles.

¹⁵⁵ CAAR, Operation DALLAS, S2D4B2, #11, 1-4 Cavalry, 13 June 1967, 1-2.

¹⁵⁶ MACOV Study, Summary.

In fact, armored vehicles were actually on the ground in Vietnam already, disproving the myths.

With regard to organization and equipment, many of the other findings of the report were simply confirmations of what was already occurring on the ground, including modifications to the M113 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) by adding protection for the track commander, and side weapon mounts for the crew, to form the vaunted Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle (ACAV). The study found that ACAVs were used in a tank-like role, which is not surprising given that the Army approved their substitution for tanks back in the early days when the deployment of armored cavalry and armored units to Vietnam hung in limbo. The 11th ACR used exclusively ACAVs in the cavalry troops during its first years in Vietnam, and the Division Cavalry squadrons used them as well.

The study also examined doctrinal trends and identified a trend of cavalry's employment as maneuver units. One trend was that armored units fixed enemy and the airmobile infantry maneuvered to encircle the enemy and complete their destruction. This was a 180-degree doctrinal flip. Moreover, it discovered that tanks were leading APC's through the jungle, contrary to established doctrine. This switch was purely a function of the terrain – the heavier tanks, as with Task Force Spur, broke the jungle for their smaller brethren, much like icebreaker ships break paths for other ships to follow.¹⁵⁷ In another doctrinal flip, the study identified that in many cases, infantry fought mounted from their ACAVs rather than dismounting from them prior to reaching the enemy. The firepower, protection, and mobility of the vehicles gave the infantry a great advantage when closing with the enemy in Vietnam.

¹⁵⁷ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 85.

Findings of the MACOV study discussed new procedures, techniques, and mission titles created out of necessity by units in Vietnam. Some of the most prevalent and effective formations and procedures include the herringbone formation, roadrunner and thunder-run missions, and the cloverleaf technique for reconnaissance. They were representative of bottom-up contributions from the force – innovative techniques created by units on the ground as the most effective way of accomplishing relevant missions. In some cases the techniques were new, while others were adaptations of previous techniques. The roadrunner and thunder run missions were procedures used for establishing and maintaining route security; however, they were in fact forms of route reconnaissance, conducted with great variation from the normal, doctrinal version of route reconnaissance. The thunder run was a quick road run by armored units, usually at night, used to deter mine-laying and also to clear roads by racing down them, firing weapons to trigger potential ambushes. Emphasis was on speed. Roadrunner operations were similar, but were usually carried out by larger units looking for trouble spots.¹⁵⁸ Some of the techniques became doctrinal, and are still used in the U.S. Army today, such as the herringbone formation and the cloverleaf method of conducting reconnaissance.

Of the missions conducted by U.S. mounted forces, the MACOV study found that the typical missions were “search and destroy,” “clear and secure,” and security missions. The study then said that these missions “entail the conduct of offensive, defensive, reconnaissance, security, or economy of force operations.”¹⁵⁹ The study said that these

¹⁵⁸ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 71-72.

¹⁵⁹ MACOV Study, 57. The version of the MACOV that this note refers to is the copy of the report that was approved for dissemination to the Army. General Starry’s book refers to the fact that part of the problem with the entire MACOV study was its unwieldiness. In its entirety, it was comprised of 7 thick volumes, and had six data supplements to back it up. It is believed that its restrictive classification at the time it came out, coupled with its size, ultimately affected its ability to get out to the force and be read.

were the most frequently assigned missions in Vietnam, and most of the time occurred simultaneously. It further said that “these missions may be assigned to infantry, tank, mechanized infantry, and armored or air cavalry units.”¹⁶⁰ This was further confirmation of mission homogenization between cavalry and maneuver units – a drift by cavalry to maneuver missions beyond the trinity.

One can conclude from the study several things. One, that overarching, broad mission terms such as “search and destroy” could be essentially anything that they needed to be. They were, in effect, *carte blanche* missions, which in turn required *carte blanche*-type organizations such as the cavalry to execute them. Another was that any ground unit could conduct maneuver missions. Another was that the component pieces of overarching missions such as “search and destroy” were composed of everything else that cavalry and maneuver units were supposed to already know how to do. This gave the overarching, broader terms some doctrinal legitimacy, to the extent that that was an issue for ground commanders. Doctrinal legitimacy was at least pondered by some, however, given the need to conduct a study such as the MACOV and examine doctrine as part of it.

By mission title, the MACOV revealed that the cavalry was conducting new missions in Vietnam, as evidenced by the need to give them new names such as the “search and destroy,” and “clear and secure.” Underneath the mission titles, however, were multiple and various conventional trinity tasks. Reconnaissance missions were undoubtedly *part* of “search and destroy” missions, because much of the “search” involved looking for the enemy, either in general or based on some idea of where he is.

Even today, parts of it are classified as “limited,” which means that it can be read but not published for public consumption.

¹⁶⁰ MACOV Study, 57.

Furthermore, there were offensive missions involved, such as a hasty attack or movement to contact, once contact with the enemy was made. By themselves, these terms were doctrinal, but in Vietnam they were not conducted by themselves in that sense; they were conducted as part of the larger operations, such as “search and clear” and “search and destroy.” By the same token, “search and destroy” missions were conducted at platoon level as well.

In addition, under the broad umbrella of the mission terms “search and destroy” and “search and clear,” there were many other types of missions that were relatively new, at least on a large scale, such as installation destruction, tunnel destruction, and jungle clearing. In the end, none of these terms by themselves would or could accurately convey what a “search and destroy” was. In fact, it seemed that the terms “search and destroy,” and “search and clear” were terms given because they most clearly articulated the *intent* of the commander. They were overarching terms in many respects because they conveyed *intent*. Intent, coupled with and driven by the nature of the terrain and enemy, caused the cavalry to conduct their missions differently, particularly with regard to “search and destroy,” and “search and clear.” However, because “search and destroy,” and “search and clear” missions were composed of elements of missions that cavalry was already trained to do, there was theoretically little cause for alarm. This fact may have contributed to a common response by commanders that, despite conducting missions in Vietnam differently, conventional cavalry trinity doctrine was “still valid.”

In an environment such as Vietnam, the peculiarity of the situation – the terrain, the enemy, and the civil and political aspects all combined – and likely demanded new terminology to convey *intent*. In absence of predictive doctrine for this strange war,

conveying intent by giving missions new overarching terms was arguably the best that could be done in the short term, because soldiers were already in the middle of fighting. It appears that the combination of circumstances in Vietnam created a total environment whereby the conventional terms and doctrine did not well apply. For example, the conventional trinity missions were based on the cavalry primarily conducting a special set of missions, reconnaissance, security, and economy of force, according to their doctrine, which nested with the rest of the conventional doctrine. When the conventional setting, and for the most part the conventional enemy went away, doctrine described itself in terms that largely no longer applied as well, though certainly many of the fundamentals still applied. Previous, trinity-based conventional doctrine could be fashioned and used, which the cavalry was able to do. As if this was not enough, new missions appeared such as jungle clearing and tunnel destruction, which in Vietnam could seldom be conducted in isolation – only in context of a larger, overarching mission such as a search and destroy. Thus, the overarching terms of “search and destroy” served two purposes: to convey intent, and to overarch the multiple other sub-missions inherent in them. It can be argued that “search and destroy” was in fact an area reconnaissance, a reconnaissance in force, a movement to contact, or others. In reality, it may have been components of all of these, and to varying degrees at different times and places, but at the end of the day the “search and destroy” and “search and clear” mission titles conveyed to the soldier what was to be done, which was ultimately the intent of the higher commander: search, and destroy (enemy and enemy installations).

The MACOV study defined “search and destroy” as operations designed “to locate enemy installations, destroy or evacuate supplies and equipment, and to destroy or

capture VC forces. Less importance was attached to seizing and holding terrain than to finding and finishing the enemy armed forces and political infrastructure.” Later in the report, it stated that “tactics employed are more in the nature of a reconnaissance in force.”¹⁶¹ The basic scheme of maneuver for “search and destroy” was to use a combination of maneuver and blocking forces, augmented with air and artillery fires.¹⁶² The study further stated that “during a search and destroy operation, armor and mechanized infantry units are initially engaged in area reconnaissance and intelligence missions; when contact is made with the enemy, they undertake offensive operations as in any meeting engagement.” Even the MACOV study used multiple terms in an attempt to pin down the description of “search and destroy,” which showed that any one attempt to pin down “search and destroy” as necessarily any one or two conventional doctrinal missions was not doable, because of its ever changing nature based on the terrain and the enemy. Each mission in and of itself, such as the area reconnaissance, or the reconnaissance in force, was taken from conventional doctrine; however, Vietnam required blending of these two categories of conventional doctrine, and others, in order to create a new “flavor,” to address the new type of area war in Vietnam.

The “clear and secure” mission was described as “offensive combat operations aimed at driving VC forces out of a designated area and keeping them out.” The study stated that “clear and secure” missions usually start out as “search and destroy,” but were ultimately different because they were sustained and emphasis was on seizing key population and communication centers. “Clear and secure” implied maintaining more of a presence, and was more aligned with such issues as population security and becoming

¹⁶¹ MACOV Study, 133.

¹⁶² MACOV Study, 58.

knowledgeable in particular area. The study mentioned that these missions were conducted by U.S. forces, as well as the ARVN and other allied forces. As with “search and destroy,” “clear and secure” was also an overarching mission term, under the title of which any number of traditional conventional tasks might apply. Further evidence of trying to come to grips with this term was that it seemed to be used interchangeably with the term “search and clear.”

Regarding security missions, the report listed them as convoy, route, base, and area security. The description of convoy security is similar to the description of the route security mission in the 1-4 Cavalry SOP. The MACOV study described the other security missions as “generally longer in duration, and, like clear and secure operations, are normally in conjunction with some search and destroy actions.” Their purpose is for “seizing and holding routes, installations, and facilities.” Security operations were conducted with the minimal force necessary, and were supported by quick reaction reserves, for which purpose armored and mechanized infantry were “particularly well suited.”¹⁶³

In general, the major change in security from the trinity missions were that in Vietnam, the missions were more literally security. In a conventional war, the real threat (though not entirely) of the enemy was beyond the front lines, behind which there was less of a worry. The conventional, trinity security missions were based on this concept. Their purpose is to protect the main body of enemy forces from observation, to provide

¹⁶³ MACOV Study, 59. It is also interesting to note here where even with security, the missions are linked to the ubiquitous search and destroy. It seems that there the overarching end of most military action in Vietnam was the “search and destroy.” Find the enemy, then bring force to bear to destroy him. Finding the enemy proved the biggest challenge, due to lack of large scale conventional formations the jungle terrain. Further, the strategic and political restrictions that prevented the destruction of the enemy’s cross-border sanctuaries did not help.

early warning, and to protect the main body physically. In contrast there were no front lines in the area war in Vietnam, and as such security had to be everywhere, and became literally securing bases, installations, fire bases, transportation routes, and convoys. 4th ID's Divisional Cavalry squadron, alternately augmented with another cavalry squadron, 2-1 Cavalry and a tank battalion, spent the greater part of the war providing route and convoy security. This was representative of a huge change from trinity missions. Security missions for the cavalry in Vietnam changed in execution and intent from the doctrinal trinity security missions.

Another aspect of the change in security was, if this was the case, what happened to relevancy of conventional security tasks such as guard, screen and cover? In the case of Vietnam, they appeared to matter less, but were still important. To the extent that they were done, a large part of the load was picked up by the air cavalry. They stepped in to help fill whatever void existed. This is seen in the example of Task Force Spur's march through previously unexplored jungle. For that mission, aerial assets provided the longer range reconnaissance, orientation, and hence provided a level of security and early warning. This may have helped make the fact that ground cavalry was not conducting their traditional trinity missions less noticeable and more palatable. Other factors that may have largely help replace the cavalry's traditional job of providing security were a result of mission homogenization – that is, that maneuver units found themselves conducting more of the trinity missions themselves, just as the cavalry ended up conducting more maneuver type missions. An example this mission homogenization was the fact that in the early experience of 1-4 Cavalry in 1966, air assets were used to conduct screening to the front primarily, while infantry were used to conduct flank and

rear security in operations large and small, and were considered to be the best at it.¹⁶⁴ The air cavalry conducted flank security as well.¹⁶⁵

The last category of missions mentioned in the MACOV study was Revolutionary Development - the name given to the task of nation-building, with the goal of government of South Vietnam being reestablished and extended over the population. At the time of the MACOV study in the first half of 1967, the U.S. forces role was to help extend this control. The study described a sequence of action, with the U.S. forces being involved primarily at the beginning of the process. Typically, military operations would be conducted in areas *not* under the control of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) (RVN), and typically consisted of first conducting a “search and destroy” mission, followed by “clear and secure” operations. ARVN forces then assumed control, working on developing the local forces and police in the area, and ultimately once this happened, they moved on as well. Meanwhile, during the early parts of this process, and even throughout, the U.S. forces conducted civic action programs to help the civilian population of that particular area with food, medical help, clothing, and other supplies. The actions of U.S. units were coordinated with local Vietnamese officials and the U.S. advisors in the area to ensure that efforts were synchronized.¹⁶⁶ Cavalry at times were involved in these operations as well, typically participating in the initial “search and destroy” missions, and “search and clear missions,” with particular emphasis on helping provide security around towns and villages prior to them being searched.

Perhaps the root of all the observations and the bedrock of adjustments to the missions of the cavalry, among others, are due to what the report identified as Area

¹⁶⁴ 1-4 Cavalry Unit SOP, 11.

¹⁶⁵ 1-4 Cavalry Unit SOP, 2.

¹⁶⁶ MACOV Study, 59-60.

Operations. Area operations were defined as what conventional warfare was not: a war with no front lines because the enemy can be anywhere. Area warfare resulted when “armed forces seeking to achieve control of the population of a country are unable to or do not desire to conduct military operations in the traditional sense, i.e. by the seizure of a succession of terrain objectives while maintaining a continuous front or line of demarcation between one’s own forces and those of the enemy.” The report described the U.S.’s role in an area war as “widespread tactical offensive operations by units varying from platoon to multi-divisional size,” and that other characteristics of area war were the presence of logistical bases and unit base camps spread throughout the country, with attendant security responsibilities. The study stated that the missions of U.S. forces were correspondingly focused on the enemy, and not on terrain, and finished by saying that all U.S. operations must be undertaken within the broader context of nation-building – allowing the RVN government to gain and maintain control over the population. A new requirement in support of this last statement is that Rules of Engagement must be established (ROE).¹⁶⁷

Area warfare, a term used in the MACOV study seemingly for the first time, evolved from the combination of the nature of the terrain and the nature of the enemy. The terrain was extremely overgrown, thick, and generally offered great cover and concealment to the smaller Viet Cong forces but yet greatly hindered the movement of U.S. conventional forces, despite the surprising mobility of U.S. mounted forces beyond initial expectations. The nature of the terrain made feasible the choice of the enemy to not engage the U.S. in conventional war, with conventional forces, with front lines and objectives based on terrain. Rather, they chose to use the terrain to their advantage to

¹⁶⁷ MACOV Study, 57.

hide and fight a war on their terms, striking when and where they chose. The enemy also used the terrain to get in amongst the people of South Vietnam to try and either coerce or win them over, to wear out both U.S. forces, and U.S. public opinion, and ultimately ride into Saigon victorious. This also added to the evolution of area warfare, the fact that a large part of the war was a war of the people – being where they were, winning them over, working on development, providing their security, and differentiating friend from foe.

Area warfare necessitated a largely new type of warfare for U.S. forces, and the terrain aspect of it in Vietnam exacerbated the challenge. The immediate tactical implications of area warfare were that U.S. forces had to expect contact at any time and from any direction; that they must be ready to deploy quickly, and that area warfare necessitated fire support from fire bases that had to provide “complete coverage of the area of operations.” The MACOV study stated that within each of the four CTZ’s, the enemy and terrain were likely to be different; therefore, forces in each CTZ “must be capable of fighting organized NVA and VC units, defeating the guerrilla, developing area stability, and securing lines of communication.”¹⁶⁸ The differences in the CTZs contributed to mission and doctrinal homogenization. Based on being responsible for their particular areas, dispersed units had to fend largely for themselves, and be prepared to fight the full range of threat, in four different CTZ’s. Units become their own cavalry and their own maneuver forces, and thus the distinction between and the more distinct roles of each began to homogenize. Further, the different and varying enemy types, and different terrain characteristics of each CTZ made attempts at doctrinal codification harder, defying creation of sets of particular doctrine with rigid boundaries. In a war

¹⁶⁸ MACOV Study, 58.

setting that defied boundaries, U.S. execution had to defy them as well. To a large degree, execution had to follow and extend beyond certain boundaries as well to meet the enemy where he was. To the extent that doctrine followed execution, implementing overarching doctrinal terminology such as “search and destroy” was a method of coping, but was also a reflection of doctrinal groping.

The MACOV report ultimately had a big impact, particularly with regard to its recommendations on equipment changes and unit organization adjustments. Recommended doctrinal changes, however, were less enthusiastically received. With regard to the U.S. Army Armor School and the Combat Developments Command Armor Agency at Fort Knox, doctrinal changes were not implemented.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps it was the caveat found in the report that stated the new types of missions being conducted in Vietnam such as “search and destroy” essentially rested on the foundation of other armor and cavalry missions. Therefore, there was probably little urgency to change doctrine. Perhaps another reason may have been that there was still the conventional Cold War threat in Europe, which the majority of the Army not involved in Vietnam was preparing to fight, and which was considered the primary threat.

In any event, it would not have added much to doctrine to codify the new missions – “search and destroy,” and “clear and search,” under an appropriate category. After all, they were what was happening in Vietnam. In the words of Lieutenant-Colonel LeWayne, the 1-4 Commander, in his 1966 SOP: “the cavalry squadron as a whole is usually employed in VN (Vietnam) as a find, fix, and eliminate force.”¹⁷⁰ As it was, some of the new concepts were already in the 1966 17-1 Armor Operations manual. The 1966

¹⁶⁹ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 86.

¹⁷⁰ 1-4 Cavalry Unit SOP, 2.

17-1 already had terms such as the “tank sweep,” and mention of the terms “search and destroy,” and “search and clear,” under the banner of the new term “strike operations.”¹⁷¹ FM 17-1 did the best job of the armor/cavalry manuals of codifying some of the new doctrinal terms, and appeared to be responsive to some of the items outlined earlier that year by 1-4 Cavalry in their SOP, such as mentioning “search and clear” and “search and destroy” under the new banner of strike operations. The Division cavalry manuals in general lagged behind, and though they added a chapter in 1968 called Stability Operations, the only new doctrinal tactical term of real significance was “search and clear.” In general, doctrine lagged, and even if new terms were added, their descriptions and depictions were lacking in comparison with the conventional doctrine of the trinity missions.

There were other obstacles to implementation of the findings of the report as well. The Army staff still did not agree with Combat Developments Command’s endorsement of the suggestion for an increased emphasis on the use of armored forces in warfare like that in Vietnam. A further complication was that around the same time the study group was getting ready to go to Vietnam, Secretary of Defense McNamara imposed troop ceilings on troop deployments to Vietnam. This meant that the troop levels suddenly became less than what had already been planned, and made it impossible to send additional armored troops to Vietnam without giving up other soldier slots, one for one. This made arguments for further troop deployments to Vietnam a parochial issue, pitting branches of the Army against each other.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ FM 17-1 Armor Operations 1966, 176, 221.

¹⁷² Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 90.

What the report did do was shed light on the nature of the war in Vietnam; what type of war it was, how it was being fought by armor and mechanized forces, and with what types of missions. The study was an adjunct to the doctrine and it was a codification, a snapshot of reality on the ground, for purposes of dissemination, in an attempt to take all that information and circulate it among the force to assist with standardization, and solicit professional commentary. The study was a sign that people were aware of possible changes in execution from doctrine, and the study was a sign of attempts to grapple with solutions.¹⁷³ The study was also meant to recommend, and perhaps even justify certain changes; some were implemented, and some were not. The study also vindicated the use of mounted forces in a war theater such as Vietnam – one where the fight was an area war, primarily against an insurgency, that also involved aspects of nation-building. Perhaps if nothing else, the study reiterated what many already knew: that Vietnam was a complicated war for many reasons, and because of this fact it challenged the use of armor and cavalry's (not to mention the Army's as a whole) conventional warfare mindset.

In June 1967, not long after the MACOV study ended, the 11th (-) ACR, consisting of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons, participated in Operation AKRON. For the operation, they were attached to the 9th Infantry Division. The purpose of the mission was to “seek out and destroy VC/NVA forces, and to conduct jungle clearing operations” along key trails. For their part the 11th ACR (-) conducted “reconnaissance and search and destroy operations to destroy VC/NVA forces and installations,” and were prepared to conduct security for the engineer work forces in their sector. At one point in the operation, the 1st

¹⁷³ There are also those who believe that the study was simply going through the motions, a study commissioned after the fact to justify what was already going on, though it seems that these people were in the minority.

squadron provided security for the regiment's base camp and conducted road clearing operations, all the while maintaining the capability to dispatch a troop-sized reaction force and preparing to provide security for the engineer work parties that were clearing jungle.¹⁷⁴ Thus, not only were cavalry squadrons conducting various missions, but even within the squadrons, there were usually simultaneous and differing missions occurring.

The missions continued to come fast, furious, and varied for the 11th ACR. Operation SANTA FE was conducted 1 November to 3 December 1967, in order to reestablish friendly control of the area along Highway 1 to the east of the 11th ACR's base camp, known as Blackhorse base camp. After gaining initial control of the highway, the 11th ACR would then transition into an attempt to surround an area with suspected VC locations, working with the 1st Brigade, 9th ID. The mission of the Regiment was first to block Highway 1, the main transportation artery in the area, in order to prevent enemy elements escape. Then they were to establish and secure a fire support base, and then pass the 1st Brigade, 9th ID, through their positions. After this was all complete, the mission of the regiment was to "conduct offensive operations to locate and destroy VC and NVA forces and installations."¹⁷⁵

Operation QUICKSILVER followed during the month December. Its purpose was to secure a particularly important logistical route "for the movement of logistics and personnel convoys of the 101st Airborne Division." In addition to the route security, limited "cordon and search" and "reconnaissance in force" missions were conducted by the 1st and 2nd Squadrons of the 11th ACR. Among some of the tactics used to accomplish these overarching missions were outposting, which was stationing small units

¹⁷⁴ Combined After Action Report (CAAR), Operation AKRON, 28 March 1968, S3D1B1, 1, 8.

¹⁷⁵ CAAR, Operation SANTA FE, Undated, S3D1B1, 1, 4.

of forces at locations along the route in positions where they could react to enemy attacks. As part of this, ACAVs were outposted every 75-150 meters along the route. Additionally, ambush patrols were conducted, six of which resulted in contact.¹⁷⁶

During Operation FARGO, 21 December to 21 January 1968, the whole ACR worked together for the first time. This was significant, since many conventional doctrinal scenarios had the ACR working together as a unit, but in Vietnam the whole regiment working together was almost unheard of. For FARGO, the mission was primarily a “recon in force” operation, with the secondary mission being road clearing and road security. The mission statement of the regiment stated that the regiment was to conduct operations in the area “to destroy enemy main force units,” and “clear and secure” National Highway 13 (the same highway that 1-4 Cavalry fought along during the summer of 1966). Additionally, as part of the road clearing, jungle clearing operations were conducted, with 950 acres of jungle along the road being cleared, “thereby eliminating VC tax collection points and ambush sites.”¹⁷⁷ The fact that 11th ACR worked together on this operation was timely, because the Tet Offensive would erupt at the end of the month.

Again, the list of the 11th ACR’s missions from the period of the summer of 1967 to early 1968 was long and varied, but in the end most of the overarching missions ended up in forms of “search and destroy” missions, though in many cases the missions were called reconnaissance in force, or “conducting offensive operations.” They also conducted security missions, mainly the physical security of routes, units, and installations/bases. The special abilities of the cavalry – mobility, protection, firepower,

¹⁷⁶ CAAR, Operation QUICKSILVER, Undated, S3D1B1, 1-4.

¹⁷⁷ CAAR, Operation FARGO, 11th ACR, S3D1B1, 21 June 1968, 1-6.

communications, and inherent task organization – ended up making them the primary candidates to conduct the spectrum of missions – variations of the trinity and well beyond. They were doing whatever they *could* be used for, and because of their abilities and capabilities, that was quite a list.

As the year progressed into the fall of 1967, there was evidence of the continuing effort to better understand the nature of the fighting in Vietnam in terms of assessing execution and doctrine. As part of this ongoing effort, a Meeting Engagement Seminar was held in Vietnam 14 September 1967. It started off by defining a meeting engagement as “the combat action that occurs when a moving force, incompletely deployed for battle, engages an enemy force, incompletely deployed for battle, engages an enemy force, static or in motion, concerning which it has inadequate intelligence.” This description likely described most of the engagements in Vietnam, and indeed the report states that “the meeting engagement is of one of the most common type operations experienced in South Vietnam.”¹⁷⁸ The report mentioned the meeting engagement as primarily a result of conducting “search and destroy” operations, and because the goal was finding the enemy, he was usually positioned on “terrain of his own choosing; hence most actions start as meeting engagements or enemy initiated ambushes.”¹⁷⁹ The seminar prescribed part of the fix for this as maintaining good flank, point and rear security, but stated overall that “no new tactic or technique is needed to turn the meeting engagement to our advantage. The only thing needed is to adhere to the already valid and tested

¹⁷⁸ “Extracts From Report of the Meeting Engagement Seminar,” S2D3B1, #60, 1967, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Meeting Engagement Seminar, 6.

principles.”¹⁸⁰ This implied that the seminar was at least partly satisfied that modified, conventional doctrine was working adequately.

What the report does not convey in so many words, however, made a statement about the trinity. In properly working trinity doctrine and execution, friendly forces find the enemy before the enemy finds him, and friendly forces find the enemy usually through reconnaissance. If units end up in a meeting engagement, then it means that more than likely, reconnaissance has failed. In this context, the meeting engagement seminar made a statement regarding the trinity and operations in Vietnam. It said in so many words that troops were relying on running into the enemy to find him, rather than finding him first with reconnaissance. This may have been due to the fact that reconnaissance in its traditional, conventional trinity sense was unable to be conducted in an area war such as Vietnam anywhere near the level of effectiveness that could be expected from reconnaissance in conventional operations, despite the best efforts from tactics and technology.

Regarding security, the seminar report found “including aerial observation and fixed wing,” as being essential to prevent the enemy from gaining the upper-hand in a meeting engagement. This was curious, because in conventional trinity doctrine, the job of the ground armored cavalry was to provide security ahead of the main body of forces and to make contact with the least possible force to enable maneuver room. However, there was no mention in the report about a shift in responsibility, if there was one, and if so, to whom it shifted. That may be because there was no best answer. The report acknowledged that “aerial observers and ground recon will not, in most cases, detect the

¹⁸⁰ Meeting Engagement Seminar, 12.

enemy before contact is made.”¹⁸¹ In this context, perhaps there was an unspoken realization that the traditional security missions weren’t working according to trinity doctrine, and weren’t *going* to work in Vietnam, so troops had to make the most of what to do once they found themselves in a meeting engagement. Statements here also allude to the fact that perhaps aerial assets and cavalry were helping replace ground cavalry in filling the trinity void.

The Doctrinal Flurry – Stability Operations and Counter-Guerrilla Operations

The MACOV Study, development of unit SOP’s such as 1-4 Cavalry’s, and other professional forums for discussion were reflections of efforts to better understand the situation on the ground in Vietnam, and establish new ways of adapting.

Organizational and equipment changes of consequence were codified in the form of Modified Tables of Organization and Equipment (MTOEs). Tactics, techniques, and procedures for units were adopted from the ground up, primarily at the company/troop level and below. They were adopted wholesale by units as they learned how best to fight the enemy and conduct operations in the jungle. At the squadron and division level, different commanders sometimes made their imprint by conducting their operations certain ways. Some of these tactics and techniques made their way into doctrine, and some didn’t.

The situation on the ground made it a different type of war, one for which the Army was largely doctrinally unprepared. As a consequence, the Army’s optimum methods for dealing with what it found in Vietnam, whether organizationally, equipment, or doctrinally, was to either study the problem, or update existing doctrine. Evidence of an even farther reaching need in the case of Vietnam was in the creation of new doctrine.

¹⁸¹ Meeting Engagement Seminar, 14.

In a sense, that is exactly what it was – a reactive situation, the Army reacting to what it found on the ground. For an Army that always emphasized being on the offensive and maintaining the initiative, being in a reactive mode was not optimal, but it was reality and the Army made the efforts accordingly. While armor and cavalry made some adjustments to their doctrine, it still followed the execution curve, and was still overwhelmingly based on conventional conflict. Meanwhile, the Army as a whole reacted and wrestled with the need to address the doctrinal challenges associated with the war in Vietnam. Evidence of this is seen in the sudden proliferation of additional manuals during the late 1960's, covering a variety of topics.

The Counterguerilla Manuals

One of important manuals updated in March, 1967 was FM 31-16, Counterguerilla Operations. The focus of this manual, as opposed to others, was mainly on how to defeat enemy guerillas. The counterguerrilla manuals were not new however. The 1951 manual, Operations Against Guerrillas, was a prescient manual in many ways, despite emphasizing infantry as the primary force with which to fight guerrillas, and a reliance on using special units trained to fight guerrillas and not regular forces. It foresaw the concept of area operations that later proved necessary and effective in Vietnam, such as when conducting reconnaissance, the usefulness of units operating in a particular area so as to not arouse suspicions of guerillas.¹⁸² In 1961, FM 31-15, Operations Against Irregular Forces, the importance of area operations was buttressed further. The manual stated with regard to patrolling that “regular combat patrols are formed and employed in a conventional manner and for harassing operations in *areas* of

¹⁸² FM 31-20 Operations Against Guerilla Forces 1951, 83.

extensive guerrilla activity.”¹⁸³ The manual commented that “only when military forces’ knowledge of the terrain begins to approach that of the irregular force can it meet the guerrillas and the underground on equal terms.”¹⁸⁴ These statements emphasized the possibility of the use of forces with an area focus, which among other benefits, allowed them to gain knowledge of the terrain in a particular area.

The 1951 manual also made prescient statements about the use of conventional forces in a counter guerrilla role. It predicted that conventional tactics would have to be modified by the situation on the ground, that attainment of terrain related objectives would matter little, and it further listed some the operations that conventional forces might conduct, “broadly classified” as the encirclement, attack, and pursuit. The manual also mentioned the hammer and anvil concept used so often and effectively in Vietnam.¹⁸⁵ It stated that “security or offensive forces can often use armor effectively,” and that their very presence is demoralizing to the enemy.¹⁸⁶

In 1967, the next version of the manual came out.¹⁸⁷ There was a substantial increase in the size and substance of the manual from the previous version in 1963. The manual parallels in many ways the 1967 Stability Operations manual, another especially important manual that came out in 1967, in that it elaborated on the enemy, and explained the terms internal defense and internal development as the parallel goals of stability operations. Like the stability operations manual of that year, the counter guerrilla manual mentioned strike operations and consolidation operations. Accordingly, strike operations were designed to harass or destroy the guerrilla force, and consolidation operations were

¹⁸³ FM 31-15 Operations Against Irregular Forces 1961, 34.

¹⁸⁴ FM 31-15, 1961, 38.

¹⁸⁵ FM 31-20, 1951, 106-114.

¹⁸⁶ FM 31-20, 1951, 129-130.

¹⁸⁷ Prior to the 1967 version, there were versions in 1961 and 1963.

designed to neutralize the guerrilla force and secure an area.¹⁸⁸ For countering small guerilla forces, the manual emphasized continuous, extensive patrolling (by foot, track or wheel vehicle, air, or water), area ambushes, numerous small raids, minimizing reserves, minimizing static defenses, maximizing use of civilian police and area coverage, and immediate destruction of guerrilla forces. The manual stated that all of these same concepts needed to be modified to defeat large guerrilla forces.¹⁸⁹ What was interesting was how prescient this manual was, like the 1951 manual, in predicting, ultimately, what types of missions that the armored cavalry would conduct in Vietnam.

The manual clearly stated that armor and cavalry had a role in fighting guerillas. Regarding armor employment, the manual mentions that armor operations would be limited by terrain, but to the extent that terrain permits, armor should be used to take advantage of the firepower, mobility, armor protection, and shock effect. Further, the manual mentioned that armor has a role in other non-combat aspects of stability operations due simply to being “an excellent show-of-force weapon.” In other stability operations related considerations, the manual also reminded tankers to exercise good fire control to prevent innocent civilians from being killed or injured.¹⁹⁰ Regarding the employment of the cavalry, the manual did not devote much to it, having already elaborated on armor use, other than “terrain permitting, armored cavalry units are well suited for offensive operations against guerrilla forces,” but it does mention regarding air cavalry that it is “readily adaptable” to counter guerrilla operations. The manual mentioned that “terrain permitting, tanks or carriers may be used effectively in counter guerrilla tactical operations to 1) execute offensive strike operations, including

¹⁸⁸ FM 31-16 Counter guerrilla Operations 1967, 49.

¹⁸⁹ FM 31-16, 1967, 50.

¹⁹⁰ FM 31-16, Counter guerrilla Operations, (1967), 51.

harassment, against well-organized guerrilla forces; 2) conduct reconnaissance and surveillance missions; 3) perform reconnaissance in force missions; 4) provide convoy escort; 5) provide mobile reserves for destruction missions or movement to blocking positions; 6) conduct demonstrations and feints; and 7) assist in defense of base complexes and airfields.”¹⁹¹ It discussed strike operations as well, stating that they were sometimes called “search and clear,” or “search and destroy” operations.

In this 1967 manual there was doctrinal linkage between the terms most often used to characterize armored cavalry missions during the first few years in Vietnam. Strike operations were to “inflict damage on, seize, disrupt, or destroy an objective – either terrain or hostile guerrilla forces.” The manual stated that during strike operations other operations were minimized. Thus, it appeared that strike operations were made possible by economy of force type missions in other places, and that the strike operations represented the new “objectives” on the battlefield: enemy oriented, and based on opportunities as they arose. The manual went further saying that “brigade strike operations are conducted to harass the guerrilla by all means available to prevent a buildup of personnel and logistical resources; destroy the guerrilla force and his base of complexes; demonstrate support for the populace in the area.”¹⁹² Later, it was mentioned regarding strike operations that they emphasized the use of airborne and airmobile forces and that once guerilla forces were located and fixed, strike forces maneuvered to capture or destroy them.¹⁹³

The manual further mentioned the raid, reconnaissance in force, movement to contact, pursuit, encirclement, operations in built-up areas, and reserves as strike

¹⁹¹ FM 31-16, 1967, 52.

¹⁹² FM 31-16 Counter guerrilla Operations 1967, 54.

¹⁹³ FM 31-16, 1967, 57-58.

operations. Regarding these, the manual made an interesting observation regarding reconnaissance. It said that in counterguerilla operations, it was rare to have thorough prior reconnaissance and time for methodical evaluation – rather, forces must quickly strike targets of opportunity. It described the “usual case” as being when a unit only has enough intelligence to “suspect” the enemy was in a particular location, then what usually happens is a reconnaissance in force, followed by a coordinated attack or raid.¹⁹⁴ This was evidence to suggest that execution was adjusting to the realities on the ground in Vietnam – that conventional, trinity reconnaissance, particularly as conducted by ground elements, was almost nonexistent. Rather, out of necessity, units such as the cavalry which *could*, conducted the closest missions to reconnaissance that there were: “search and destroy,” “search and clear,” and reconnaissance in force missions, among others.

Regarding consolidation operations, those operations that took place routinely and were occasionally punctuated by strike operations, the manual defined them as those actions that “maintain or restore internal security of that area.”¹⁹⁵ The offensive phases of them were the strike operations; the rest was the defensive phase. The offensive phase might consist of patrolling, area surveillance, ambushes, and other small-unit actions to disrupt and gain information.¹⁹⁶ The patrolling operations were to gather intelligence, and cover the entire area to be controlled, to set the stage for strike operations. When consolidation was in a defensive phase, it involved “holding an area against guerrilla attack to permit the civilian security forces and other governmental agencies to conduct their internal defense and development programs.”¹⁹⁷ Other defensive tasks enumerated

¹⁹⁴ FM 31-16, 1967, 59.

¹⁹⁵ FM 31-16 1967, 67.

¹⁹⁶ FM 31-16, 1967, 65.

¹⁹⁷ FM 31-16, 1967, 65.

focus on deterrence, area denial, reducing the guerrilla's capacity for offensive action, and economizing forces in one area so that other forces could be used decisively in another.¹⁹⁸ This last information alluded to an economy of force role, which the cavalry did in Vietnam.

The contrast between the 1967 counterguerilla manual and the previous version, in 1963, was remarkable. The 1967 version clearly reflected execution in Vietnam. The 1963 version did not have anything on strike or consolidation operations, and only devoted two pages to armor and armored cavalry in a counterguerrilla role. However, the 1963 manual did list twelve missions that armored cavalry could conduct, but none were trinity missions, or conventional economy of force attack or defend missions. Security appeared in the form of convoy security, lines of communication security, and installation / community security.¹⁹⁹ This confirmed that doctrine made a huge jump in 1967 to reflect execution on the ground. Perhaps what was most important about the counterguerilla manuals, particularly the 1951 and 1963 manuals, were that they presaged not only cavalry's use in a counterguerrilla environment, and also changes from the trinity missions.

Stability Operations

Another long-lasting doctrinal term was coined in 1967, called "stability operations." The 1968 version of FM 100-5, the Army's overarching operations manual, devoted a chapter to it. The chapter stated that the scope of stability operations was to "provide general doctrine for U.S. Army participation in U.S. efforts to aid friendly nations in preventing and combating insurgency," and stated that "stability operations are

¹⁹⁸ FM 31-16, 1967, 66.

¹⁹⁹ FM 31-16, Counterguerrilla Operations, (1963), 85.

that type of internal defense and internal development operation and assistance provided by the Armed Forces to maintain, restore, or establish a climate of order within which responsible government can function effectively and without which progress cannot be achieved.” It further acknowledged that while some countries and agencies use the term “counterinsurgency” for these types of operations, within the U.S. Army use of the terms “stability operations,” or “internal defense and internal development” are preferred to “counterinsurgency.” The manual also stated that “assistance in internal defense and internal development is a normal function of U.S. Army operations. This function may be the sole purpose of Army operations, or it may be conducted in conjunction with any other Army roles.”²⁰⁰ This last statement was significant in that the concept of stability operations was a “normal function,” and could be the only focus of U.S. troops. The statement gave stability operations mainstream status.

FM 31-23, Stability Operations, came out in December, 1967. It was a reflection of attempts to better holistically explain and understand an insurgency.²⁰¹ According to the manual there were two parts to a national strategy for stability operations. One was establishing an internal defense, and the other was internal development. While both were important and could fluctuate, the “primary objective of the governments (of Host Countries) will be the attainment of internal security, which will permit economic, political, and social growth.” Under National Strategy, it further went on to say that “in the past, the strategy to defeat insurgencies has been viewed mainly, if not entirely, as a

²⁰⁰ FM 100-5, 1968, 13-1.

²⁰¹ This manual, together with FM 31-16, Counterguerilla Operations, dated 24 March 1967, superseded the previous manual, FM 31-15, Operations Against Irregular Forces, date 31 May 1961. Manuals devoted to the topic of guerilla-type warfare were nothing new, but had not moved out of the Special Operations / infantry and Marine realm until after 1960. Now, in the wake of Vietnam, these two new manuals both came in the same year, the first since 1961.

counterguerilla (fighter on fighter) problem and has been handled largely by military and police actions. Viewed as part of the larger problem of internal development, the prevention of subversive insurgency includes measures for internal political, economic, and social development.” Further, “basically, national strategy of internal defense and internal development will be directed toward two main considerations – the insurgent and the population.” Thus, there was now recognition, codified in doctrine, that a war such as that in Vietnam (though not directly mentioned as such) was in reality more than just a military effort. Rather, it was a parallel effort.²⁰²

Regarding the insurgent, it discussed the importance of “elimination or neutralization of the insurgent leadership and infrastructure,” and emphasized that to defeat the insurgent, pressure must be maintained through tactical operations to destroy the enemy, his supplies, and his equipment. Fragmenting the enemy forces was also a goal, which then put Host Country forces in less danger of being overrun and freed them up to cover more area.²⁰³ While the manual still mentioned destruction of the enemy, it also emphasized destruction of supplies and equipment, and used other key words such as “neutralization,” “pressure,” and “fragmenting.” This was a subtle change, but one more reflective of the whole environment, more toward emphasis on a “one war” concept. The language leaves the possibility open that the enemy could be defeated by doing more things than *just* seeking his destruction, but yet it did not ignore destruction as a goal either.

According to the manual, an insurgency had three phases, and that it (in the case of Vietnam) was based on the revolutionary doctrine of Mao and Lenin. Phase I was the

²⁰² FM 31-23, Stability Operations 1967, 23. There was even an additional manual created to elaborate more on these two efforts – FM 100-20 – Internal Defense and Internal Development Operations.

²⁰³ FM 31-23, Stability Operations 1967, 23-24.

Passive Stage, a long, protracted process of establishing infrastructure. Phase II was the Active Stage, which extended political control and increased military action in armed resistance to government forces. Phase III was the mobile phase – open warfare. The countering U.S. strategy was laid out according to the same phases. Phase I puts emphasis on internal development; Phase II called for a shift in strategy, to “reorient (the employment of military forces) directly against armed insurgents, their underground organization, support system, external sanctuary, or outside supporting power.” Phase III results when the Host Country government is in immediate danger of military defeat, and thus the U.S. or the particular nation needed to be prepared to defeat the threat should it get to that level.²⁰⁴

It appeared that in the case of Vietnam, U.S. ground forces never had the luxury of being in Phase I of an insurgency. Rather, it appeared that at the time of U.S. ground forces introduction in 1965, the insurgency bordered on Phase III, if not already in Phase III. Prior to that, U.S. advisors and the ARVN were involved in Phase II. Once they arrived in 1965, U.S. ground forces helped push things back to Phase II, and the conflict remained in that stage for the duration. It remained generally in a deadlocked state, with the U.S. not able to fully push things back down to Phase I, but the enemy unable to reach Phase III as long as U.S. ground forces remained.

The manual spelled out an interesting chain of doctrine from the highest levels, down to the tactical level. At the top were the two parts of a national strategy for stability operations: internal defense, and internal development. There were three

²⁰⁴ FM 31-23 Stability Operations 1967, 26. Regarding Phase II, interestingly, are statements which were minimally followed in the Vietnam War. U.S. forces did not prosecute the war against North Vietnam, the nation behind the war, to the fullest extent – only in bombings. Additionally, the U.S. did not attack enemy sanctuaries either, except through bombings and a brief invasion of Cambodia in 1970.

campaigns that could be conducted in support of these two parts. The three types of campaigns were the consolidation campaign, and strike campaign, and the remote area campaign. The overarching and continuing campaign was the consolidation campaign. It could be punctuated by the strike campaigns, and remote area campaigns as necessary. Of these three campaigns, the strike and consolidation campaigns also each had below them strike and consolidation operations, respectively. At the campaign level for both, the strike campaign was conducted to find, fix, and destroy insurgent tactical forces, and was characterized by offensive tactical operations, while the consolidation campaign was essentially everything else as it pertained to civil-military actions, with an emphasis on providing a secure, stable environment for the populace in which development can take place. It stated that “consolidation campaigns often have been referred to as “clear and hold,” “strategic hamlet,” “pacification,” “rural reconstruction,” and “revolutionary development” operations. This clarification finally consolidated this multitude of terms in an overarching category, which if nothing else simplified understanding a doctrinal concept, as opposed to several different terms.

The strike campaign definition was further broken down into an operations sub-component. Strike operations included encirclement, pursuit, sweep, and coordinated attack.²⁰⁵ By the time the next version came out in 1972, the strike operations category had swelled to include: movement to contact, reconnaissance in force, encirclement, pursuit, raid, sweep, and coordinated attack.²⁰⁶ There was also mention in the 1967 manual of reconnaissance, stating that it was to “locate and test insurgent dispositions, or to develop additional intelligence,” and was characterized by “continuous, decentralized,

²⁰⁵ FM 31-23, 1967, 59.

²⁰⁶ FM 31-23 Stability Operations 1972, 8-12.

small unit operations.”²⁰⁷ Operations for the consolidation campaign included all the other civil aspects, such as police, paramilitary, social, psychological, and others.

Overall, the 1967 stability operations manual was prescient with regard to tactics, reflecting a growing emphasis on area-related execution and awareness and a better understanding of the total environment in Vietnam. It stated that “in stability operations, maximum aggressive use of armor units in suitable areas will *deny* these *areas* to the insurgents and release larger infantry forces for employment in terrain which is restrictive to armor.”²⁰⁸ This was a change in focus from simply destruction, to a denial approach: keep them out from the start. It emphasized maximizing the use of forces in aggressive patrolling to not let the enemy rest and regroup, and manning of outposts with minimum forces. It called these harassing tactics, in an economy of force role.²⁰⁹ The manual emphasized the offense, maintaining continuous pressure on the enemy by maintaining contact, not committing large forces until enemy forces were found and fixed, and, with an eye toward the pacification, it mentioned to not draw straight unit boundary lines; rather, they should be drawn based on the local or regional political considerations.²¹⁰

Regarding the use of armored cavalry and other mounted forces, the manual was very significant, at least in terms of what it contained. Because of inherent capabilities such as mobility, flexibility, combined arms, organic air assets, firepower, and staying power, it found that armored units were very useful in stability operations. This newfound usefulness was newly codified in the concept of stability operations. It took armored cavalry’s performance in Vietnam to achieve this recognition, a far cry from

²⁰⁷ FM 31-23 Stability Operations 1967, 59.

²⁰⁸ FM 31-23, 1967, 113-114.

²⁰⁹ FM 31-23, 1967, 90.

²¹⁰ FM 31-23, 1967, 26, 90.

those that prior to 1965 did not envision a role for armored cavalry or mounted forces in Vietnam.²¹¹

The impact of these manuals, 1967 FM 31-16, Counter guerrilla Operations and FM 31-23, Stability Operations on the cavalry was probably minimal in terms of conduct of the war in Vietnam. It was doubtful that many commanders were able to crack open the stability operations manual in the middle of the jungle. However, the manuals were significant in their attempts to understand and codify the “one war,” and in terms of demonstrating changes in the trinity. In them, all of the trinity missions for cavalry had changed, an example of the doctrine following the reality of execution. Reconnaissance was part of strike operations, but yet was continuous and ongoing because the enemy was all around. Reconnaissance was redefined under the banner of the strike campaign (and as a consequence fused with the offense) as “find, fix, and destroy.” This definition was the essence of “search and destroy.” Further, reconnaissance was “characterized by continuous, decentralized, small unit operations.”²¹² This seemed reflective of General Abrams’ future “one war” focus, and the resultant change in strategy. Security fell under the banner of consolidation operations but was unlike security in the trinity sense; it was more literal, because like changes to reconnaissance, the enemy is all around. Again, this was a reflection of reality. Economy of force was not enabling the decisive maneuver of the rest of the main body of forces in the trinity sense. Economy of force came to mean

²¹¹ Regarding this point, in fairness to the decision-makers, up until ground forces were introduced, it was debatable that the conflict would ever get to that point that it required their introduction. The introduction of tanks by accident, and the reluctance to send mounted forces there, is proof that their role was not envisioned, much less expected. Once it happened, then mounted forces had to react to the situation they found on the ground. With advisors in Vietnam helping the South Vietnamese, if that had alone had proved sufficient, then so much the better. As it turned out, it was not enough.

²¹² FM 31-23, 1967, 59. It is true that well before Abrams, as this thesis shows, there were plenty of small unit operations, decentralized, ongoing, and simultaneous. However, the big change is that after Abrams came aboard, with the exception of the Cambodian invasion in 1971, there not as many large-scale, “big battalion” operations similar to CEDAR FALLS, etc.

forces that had an area of responsibility a particular area of the countryside, enabling other forces to conduct strike operations as opportunities arose. It also appeared that missions were not cavalry specific. Because of the nature of the terrain and the enemy, which resulted in the need for area-type operations, cavalry units found themselves participating in strike operations or consolidation operations. In short, the requirements of area warfare broadened their mission spectrum.

The downside of the manuals was that they were still reactive, putting into doctrine what was happening on the ground in Vietnam, after the fact. Further, there were not many specifics. While conventional, tactical manuals were full of diagrams and pictures, diagrams were minimal in the case of these manuals. Perhaps this was not part of the charter of the manuals. Particularly in the case of the stability operations manual, the manuals seem to be trying to convey the holistic *concept* to the reader, leaving the tactical specifics to the other, more tactically focused manuals, such as 17-95, the armored cavalry manual and 17-36, the division cavalry manual. Indeed, the school of thought that felt that the U.S. implemented the wrong strategy in Vietnam by failing to understand earlier the importance of the “one war” concept would applaud the efforts to better convey context. While this was good, it was debatable as to whether the omission of more tactical specifics was on purpose or by accident. The danger might have been that, despite all the different manuals, tactical methods tested and tried in Vietnam were not getting codified like they should.

New Missions

As if the challenges of fighting the civil-military war of stability operations and an insurgency were not enough, while adjusting their conventional trinity missions the

cavalry also had to figure out other new missions. As with their combat missions, the cavalry was not unlike most other combat units in Vietnam in performing these with little to no prior training; they took what they knew, adapted it, and did it. Most of these missions were new, and required adaptations of conventional cavalry doctrine and the use of basic combat skills. Additionally, the cavalry tailored their missions according to the situation on the ground. Jungle clearing was done to deny the enemy area to set up bases, and to restrict his movement, and to “interdict infiltration routes” in order to help protect the populated areas.²¹³ Additionally, the goal was to use the wood to give to the people, and to then use the land for agricultural purposes. Jungle clearing was also used to clear areas along highways for the purposes of foiling ambushes.

As part of area warfare in Vietnam, both small and large-scale jungle clearing operations became a standard security mission for the cavalry. A large part of the mission of Operation CEDAR FALLS was to clear jungle, and build roads into previously inaccessible areas. Another jungle clearing operation that involved the entire 1st ID was Operation PAUL BUNYAN, from 19 July, 1967 to 11 September 1967. While the operation did not involve the whole division, it fell under division control. It consisted of two phases, and 1-4 Cavalry was involved in the second phase.²¹⁴ While the plows cleared, the mounted units provided security for them. By the end of the operation the plows had cleared 14,566 acres. This was an example of another security mission that the cavalry conducted. Their mobility allowed them to keep up with the plows, and

²¹³ After Action Report (AAR), Operation PAUL BUNYON, 1 ID, 19 July – September 1967. S2D4B2, #2, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 10.

²¹⁴ After Action Report, Operation PAUL BUNYON, 1 ID, 19 July – September 1967. S2D4B2, #2, 1.

their tracks enabled them to move over downed logs, something wheeled vehicles could not do.²¹⁵ As the war progressed, cavalry units honed their techniques.

There were other new missions as well. An example of one was in the spring of 1966, elements of the 1-4 Cavalry with other U.S. and ARVN units participated in LAM SON II, a “highly specialized pacification operation.”²¹⁶ Pacification was a term used throughout the Vietnam War to mean the battle to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people in the countryside. More specifically, it was the term given to all efforts focused on the welfare, life improvement, and security of citizens in the countryside – outside of missions to seek out and destroy organized enemy forces. Pacification focused more on countering the political strength and influence of the Viet Cong by winning the loyalty of the people through building infrastructure, offering medical and agricultural assistance, and in many cases, simply maintaining a positive and visible presence.²¹⁷ Part of pacification consisted of first identifying areas of VC influence, then searching villages for suspected VC, and then transitioning efforts in the village toward education of and providing services to the people of the village. Cavalry units found themselves taking part in these missions from time to time. Their primary role was security, primarily in the first part of these operations, accomplished by sealing off a village to prevent exit and entry of VC. Usually for these operations, the actual dealing with the inhabitants of a particular village was done by members of the ARVN. To help run some of these pacification related missions, the 1st ID created a special

²¹⁵ AAR, Operation PAUL BUNYON, 1 ID, 9.

²¹⁶ Operational Report Lessons Learned (ORLL) 1 May – 31 July 1966, 1st Infantry Division, S2D4B2, #5, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 10. Pacification is what became, in official doctrine, known as “consolidation operations” in the 1973 Stability Operations Field Manual.

²¹⁷ Ray Bonds, ed., *The Vietnam War: The Illustrated History of the Conflict in Southeast Asia.* (New York : Crown, 1983), 106.

Pacification Task Force, composed of primarily a U.S. infantry battalion and ARVN troops, but augmented occasionally by cavalry troops.²¹⁸

LAM SON 67 was an example of a non-conventional operation that demanded learning on the move for the cavalry. A cavalry squadron took part along with other infantry battalions. While not all the battalions / squadrons or even their subunits conducted this operation simultaneously, it was continuous in duration, demonstrating resolve to the task. The operation revealed that U.S. forces recognized the value of continual experience in a given area. A developed technique was to search “hardcore” VC villages on a continuing basis from month to month, using seal and search techniques. This also included repeat seal and search missions to catch VC unaware, including sometimes with only one week in between. In the month of March, they were able to search 11 villages, with “significant” results. One particular village yielded 291 detainees, and little over two weeks later it was hit again, yielding 88 detainees, while another yielded initially no detainees, but one week later it yielded 4 VC, 24 draft dodgers, and 176 detainees. Detainees were interrogated in order to uncover VC or VC supporters. LAM SON would continue into April that year.²¹⁹

Tet

Almost as if mocking adaptation of conventional trinity doctrine to the peculiar and multi-faceted environment of Vietnam, events happened to abruptly shift units back to their conventional, doctrinal roles. The Tet Offensive was one of these events, erupting at the end of January, 1968. For this brief period, the fighting the cavalry

²¹⁸ ORLL, May/July 1966, 1st ID, S2D4B2, #5, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 10.

²¹⁹ Monthly Evaluation Report (MER), 1st ID, MAR 1967, S2D4B2, #6, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 1.

participated in was similar to the conventional warfare for which they were trained, attacking to secure objectives from the enemy rather than beating the jungle looking for small units of the enemy. The Tet offensive consisted of attacks by Viet Cong and NVA soldiers across the length of all of Vietnam, in the form of simultaneous assaults on Saigon, 36 of the 43 provincial capitals, and 64 of the district capitals. With the exception of Hue where the enemy committed large numbers of regular troops, the rest of the assaults were beaten back with heavy losses to the enemy in approximately two weeks.²²⁰

During Tet the cavalry made their presence felt. One example of the cavalry racing to the rescue, akin to the old western movies, was the race by 3-4 Cavalry, the division cavalry squadron of the 25th Infantry division. One of its troops, Troop C, raced down Highway 1, the main artery running north/south, toward Saigon. With their squadron commander overhead in a helicopter helping them avoid any ambushes en route, the Troop arrived at the Tan San Nhut airfield which was under attack. After fighting through one attempt to stop them and losing some vehicles in the process, the troop crashed into the rear of Viet Cong units that were on the verge of fighting their way onto the airfield. This action broke the back of the enemy, and proved to be the decisive action in keeping the enemy from capturing the airfield.²²¹

Another example of cavalry on the move during Tet was Troop A of 3-5 Cavalry.²²² The Troop was ordered from its position where it was conducting security for a firebase. Leaving one platoon there, the troop blasted its way through one ambush en

²²⁰ Andrew Krepinovich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 239.

²²¹ Shelby Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*. (Novato, CA : Presidio, 1985), 230-231.

²²² Interestingly enough, in the book *Ringed in Steel*, written by an officer who served in the 11th ACR, A Troop is from the 11th ACR, not the 3-5 Cavalry. (98-99)

route, disrupted enemy movement, and upon reaching the air base at Ben Hoa, foiled an enemy ambush by attacking it behind. ' Once this was done, the remainder of the unit entered the airfield, linked up with elements of the 101st airborne division, and fought with them until the last enemy attempts to take the airfield were beaten off.²²³

The 11th ACR was also on the move during Tet. They were notified to move on 31 January while they were in the middle of the jungle of War Zone C. They pulled out, linked up the entire regiment, and moved over 100 kilometers in 8 hours to encircle and protect a threatened airfield complex at Long Binh – Ben Hoa.²²⁴

In the end the Tet Offensive was a failure. In every case, the VC/NVA attacks were beaten off with heavy losses. With the exception of Hue, most NVA troops were unable to link up with the VC cadre that had infiltrated the cities because they were interdicted with air and ground attacks, and the uprisings of city people that the VC envisioned never materialized.²²⁵ Of the estimated 85,000 to 100,000 attackers, half were slain.²²⁶ In the long term, because many of the South Vietnamese VC cadres were in effect wiped out, Tet ultimately proved detrimental to their cause. Their losses were to have long term negative affects on the overall war strategy for the VC and the North Vietnamese, because the lost cadres had better familiarity with the countryside and its inhabitants than their North Vietnamese replacements. Any potential for winning the war in the south with only the VC was not to be.

²²³ Starry, 125.

²²⁴ This action by the 11th ACR inspired a book with the title *Ringed in Steel: Armored Cavalry, Vietnam 1967-68*.

²²⁵ Alan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense : A Military History of the United States*. (New York : The Free Press, 1984), 560.

²²⁶ Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S. – Vietnam In Perspective*. (Novato, CA : Presidio, 1978), 202.

In contrast, however, the Tet Offensive was a victory for the Communists in the psychological sense, because their short-lived possession of many of the cities in Vietnam gave the impression that they were winning. Additionally, ARVN troops suffered heavy losses, and desertions escalated sharply after Tet.²²⁷ As expressed in *For the Common Defense*, all of these caused President Johnson to “snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.” Within a month, he denied Westmoreland’s request for more troops to continue to the pursuit, stated that he would not seek re-election, and unilaterally stopped Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam that in the past, if nothing else, had been used as a bargaining chip at the negotiating table.²²⁸

What Tet meant for the armored cavalry is that for they were able to demonstrate their effectiveness in racing to the rescue. Five cavalry squadrons proved themselves critical to the success in beating off the attacks of Tet by forming a ring around the Saigon area of more than 500 vehicles, securing critical U.S. installations in the process.²²⁹ Furthermore, they used tactics very similar to conventional tactics – conducting attacks in order to secure specific, terrain based objectives. They were very successful in this series of actions, and perhaps in Tet enjoyed a crowning moment, a high contrast from three years earlier when a role for them in Vietnam was not envisioned.

1968 to 1973: A Change in Strategy

²²⁷ Shelby Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*. (Novato, CA : Presidio, 1985), 245.

²²⁸ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 560.

²²⁹ Michael Mahler, *Ringed in Steel: Armored Cavalry, 1967-68*. (Novato, CA : Presidio, 1986), 101.

Later that same year, not long after Tet, General Abrams took command of MACV from General Westmoreland in July, 1968. By early 1969, he declared a “One War” policy in Vietnam, a policy that newly arrived President Nixon adopted.²³⁰ From this point until the drawdown of U.S. troops was complete in 1973, the U.S. forces in Vietnam experienced change because of this changed strategy – a change from the top down. The priorities shifted away mainly seeking out and combating the enemy units, the essence of “search and destroy,” and changed to the dual emphasis of fighting “one war.” Whereas previously, U.S. forces primarily carried the fighting load and were proportionally less involved in the civilian side of the war, now the two sides of the war were to receive equal emphasis. Part of this plan rested on adopting the policy of Vietnamization – the policy of improving the South Vietnamese forces with the goal of giving them more responsibility and ownership of the war, while at the same time shifting more U.S. focus on providing security for the people near where the people lived.²³¹

While not meaning a cessation of combat against the enemy, the new strategy shift framed a new way of attacking the problem of the war. It represented a shift from large-scale conventional style operations with a goal of “body count,” as part of General Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition, to an emphasis on fighting the whole war. As such, it required that the fighting effort be fused with pacification and territorial security; that the various aspects be better integrated and synchronized into the “one-war” concept. In the mind of Abrams, the real war lay in securing the people, helping them, and at the same time getting more participation from them.

²³⁰ Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 562.

²³¹ Shelby Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of An American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*. (Novato, CA : Presidio, 1985), 283.

The change in strategy was not an arbitrary decision. The increased emphasis on Vietnamization and pacification was able to happen largely because the timing was right. The enemy's bid to topple the South Vietnamese government in 1965, with largely conventional means, had been thwarted. Ever since, with the intervention of U.S. forces and the subsequent large-scale operations directed against them, they had not been able to move past Phase II of an insurgency. Another reason the timing was right was that the vast destruction of the Viet Cong leadership and cadre during Tet set the enemy back in his progress. In general, the level of enemy activity was down, which was a good time to try a change in strategy. Not to mention General Abrams seemed to have a clear understanding and vision of how the war should be fought. Another reason was that the U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese had little choice. In June 1969, it was announced that U.S. troops would begin to withdraw from Vietnam, so both the U.S. and the South Vietnamese knew that the South Vietnamese had to be prepared to increasingly stand on their own.²³²

The change in strategy affected the conduct of military operations. It was said that within 15 minutes of Abrams taking over, tactics changed. The new focus was not totally on destruction, but also on control of the people. General Abrams knew that the war was not just one of the "big battalions"; rather, it was a war that was taking place on several levels – destruction of the enemy, territorial security, and pacification – all simultaneously.²³³ Now, the strategy would be to set up forces in such a way as to protect the populations, rather than spend too much time thrashing and flailing through the

²³² Stanton, p. 285. After June, 1969, the ante was upped when it was pronounced that the drawdown of U.S. forces would continue, regardless. In retrospect, this was probably not the wisest decision.

²³³ Sorley, Lewis. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. (New York : Harcourt and Brace, 1999), 17-18.

jungles. Inherent in this strategy was the recognition that the enemy's real objective was the people.²³⁴ As one journalist was quoted in the book by historian Lewis Sorley, "where Westmoreland was a search and destroy and count the bodies man, Abrams proved to an interdict and weigh the rice man."²³⁵ As part of all this, there was a shift from larger units conducting less operations, to smaller, more agile units covering more area, and then converging numbers to bear in the event of contact. What this meant was more frequent small unit actions, patrolling and ambushes, in order to cut off the "logistics nose" of the enemy and interdict his movement toward the populace.²³⁶ "Logistics nose" was a term coined by General Abrams, and described what he came to realize was critical to the enemy war effort: the preposition of caches of ammunition, weapons, and food out *in front* of a planned advance. To find these caches was to cut off this "nose."

The strategic change implemented by Abrams and the American ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, characterized the actions of the U.S. army for the remainder of the war. Immediately after Tet, U.S. units continued to pursue the enemy vigorously, and continued to do fight well, even though the drawdown began in June 1969.²³⁷ One of the big, early changes with potential to have a direct effect on cavalry operations was a change in terminology. "Search and destroy" became the term "clear and hold." "Clear and hold" meant clearing the enemy out of an area, but then keeping him out.²³⁸ There was also an interesting shift in reconnaissance in general, especially as it pertained to the division cavalry squadrons. Whereas before, "search and destroy" sought the enemy,

²³⁴ Sorley, 20.

²³⁵ Sorley, 21.

²³⁶ Sorley, 20-21. The logistics nose was a concept articulated by Abrams, and was based on the fact that the enemy stored his supplies in caches, laid in place ahead of his advance, until the time of need arose. The U.S.'s job was to find these caches and destroy them. In any event, Abrams made it more of a priority, because enemy caches were certainly captured and destroyed prior.

²³⁷ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 562.

²³⁸ Sorley, 30.

under the new strategy reconnaissance was officially stated as a technique used to accomplish security objectives.²³⁹ In this case, the population was secured more effectively by having cavalry units break down into areas of operation that one unit would work habitually for a period of time, using a number of different methods, but essentially patrolling, looking for the enemy, but also gaining familiarity with the terrain and thus harassing and denying the enemy access to the people. The squadrons of the 11th ACR still continued to conduct reconnaissance in force operations the majority of the time.²⁴⁰

Execution began to show the effects of the change in strategy, at least on paper. The widespread references to “search and destroy” missions were down, though old habits died hard. In their place were more references to reconnaissance in force, and the “pile on.” Further, there were more references to the success of joint air cavalry, ground cavalry, and infantry missions. Generally, references were to the air cavalry locating the enemy, fixing him, and then “piling on” with additional ground elements. The commander of the 11th ACR in early 1969, Colonel Leach, commented about these joint operations that “the technique of air cavalry with armor-infantry teams has proved to be very effective both in medium jungle as well as open terrain. Reinforcing air cavalry contacts with armor heavy elements to block escape routes as well as to destroy the enemy has produced significant results.”²⁴¹

Part of the proof of this switch in emphasis to more small-unit actions was in the actions of 1-1 Cavalry, the division cavalry squadron for the 23rd Americal Division,

²³⁹ ACTIV Study, “Optimum Mix of Armored Vehicles for Use in Stability Operations”, 1971, Volume II, Annex G, Armored Cavalry Regiment, Armor School Library, Ft. Knox, KY, H-6.

²⁴⁰ ACTIV Study, G-5.

²⁴¹ Quarterly Evaluation Report, (QER) 1st QTR CY 1969, 11th ACR, S3D1B1, 5 April 1969, 12.

which operated up north in I CTZ. During the period from June of 1968 to May of 1969, their strategy was to increase the tempo of operations to “actively seek him out and destroy him,” whenever the enemy broke down into small units to avoid engagements. They also increased their night small-unit operations. In the opinion of their division commander, by using more small-unit operations, they were very successful.²⁴²

Cavalry Doctrine of the Later Years

Continuing the trend, the 1968 and 1973 Divisional Cavalry manuals followed the evolution of cavalry execution during the Vietnam War. By the November, 1968 version the mission statement read virtually the same; the trinity was intact. The 1968 manual stated again that the cavalry “provides the higher commander the capability to concentrate the efforts of other elements of the command on other important objectives or aspects of the mission.” This statement was still an accurate statement about how cavalry operated in Vietnam, as will be discussed later, but only in a very different sense from the doctrinal intent.

A huge change from the 1965 manual was a change to the mission paragraph, however. The difference was a sentence stating that “they (armored cavalry) may function as maneuver units in stability operations. As these missions pertain to armored cavalry units, they are appropriately discussed in this manual as reconnaissance, security, and economy of force operations.”²⁴³ With this one statement doctrine granted carte blanche on the use of the cavalry – cavalry could be used as a maneuver force, or virtually anything else for that matter. Despite this seeming major shift, this new statement avoided implying any need for new doctrine by essentially saying that the

²⁴² Senior Officer Debriefing Report: MG Charles M. Gettys, CG, Americal Division, June 1968 - May 1969. S7D2, #11, Armor in Vietnam Collection, Patton Museum, Ft. Knox, KY, 9.

²⁴³ FM 17-36 Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units 1968, 1-4.

cavalry could conduct regular maneuver force missions by virtue of being able to conduct the more specialized trinity missions.

Further adjustments in the 1968 manual appeared in the discussion of security. The manual added a category called “Degrees of Security,” listing and defining its components of “Cover,” “Protect,” “Screen,” and “Security forces.” In virtually every description of these was a requirement to engage the enemy, even in screening, where it was spelled out that within their capability, screening forces were authorized to “destroy or repel enemy patrols.”²⁴⁴ Traditionally, screening was a mission in which the enemy was detected, and visual contact maintained until the enemy could be destroyed either by artillery fire or maneuver units, so this represented a huge change.

There is also a reliance on economy of force implicit in the requirement to engage the enemy in each of these degrees of security. Their doctrinal terms request of the cavalry the ability to delay, engage, defeat, destroy, harass, impede, repel, or generally engage in “offensive, defensive, or delaying actions as required in order to accomplish the mission.”²⁴⁵ The specific laundry list expected of the cavalry was growing.

A further difference of the 1968 manual was an added section on surveillance at all of the levels of cavalry: the platoon, troop, air cavalry troop, and squadron levels. The manual states that surveillance was conducted as an “inherent part” of reconnaissance and security. In essence, by conducting reconnaissance and security missions, surveillance was conducted as well. In the mission portion, there was an entirely new surveillance section, with surveillance fundamentals, just like for reconnaissance and security. An entirely new, albeit short (three-page) chapter was devoted to surveillance at the squadron

²⁴⁴ FM 17-36, 1968, 1-5.

²⁴⁵ FM 17-36, 1968, 1-5.

level. It referred to that fact that surveillance tasks and procedures were similar to screening missions.²⁴⁶ As it related to the trinity, the increased emphasis on surveillance was tied to both reconnaissance and security.²⁴⁷

This increased emphasis on surveillance in 1968 may have arisen from experiences with cavalry operations in Vietnam. It may have grown out of need. With the reconnaissance and security abilities of the cavalry watered-down by the challenges of Vietnam, and the melding of trinity reconnaissance missions with offensive, tramping herd operations such as “search and destroy,” the need for as much intelligence only grew. To help fill the void, surveillance was added to the cavalry manuals. To help make this possible were technological advances such as air and ground mounted surveillance radar, seismic devices, photography, and night optics. The cavalry increasingly used night vision devices in particular, as they increased their night operations over the course of the war.²⁴⁸

Another big reason for the growing emphasis on surveillance was to emphasize to the planners and executors the importance of continually being on the watch for the enemy. Surveillance needed to be conducted virtually non-stop, and a way to make this a reality was to make it an inherent part of reconnaissance and security. The new emphasis was a reflection of continuing to adapt reconnaissance and surveillance to the conflict in

²⁴⁶ FM 17-36, 1968, 11-2.

²⁴⁷ One take on increased emphasis on surveillance is certainly that it reflects growth of surveillance technology, new equipment. Further than that, however, is an implication that the trinity in Vietnam, because of the lack of front lines, required more of an emphasis on the “continuousness” nature of operations in Vietnam, more than the usual trinity. There were no front lines, so there were no highs and lows of either being on the front line or not; rather, it was a continuous level of effort, somewhere in between, though obviously punctuated with sharp, sudden actions. Emphasis on surveillance was a way of emphasizing the continuous nature of the trinity, especially reconnaissance and security.

²⁴⁸ ACTIV Study, p. H-7. This states that cavalry squadrons conducted some type of mounted night movement on an average of 30% of nights, albeit mostly with whatever lights they felt like using. They did conduct more night ambush patrols, and strongpoint ambushes. For division cavalry, it was about 9% of nights on average (H-3) and for the ACR squadrons, it was 15% of nights (G-3).

Vietnam, which required more of an emphasis on interdiction, increased night surveillance posts, and a growing sensitivity to all activities, military and civilian, in a given area of operations. Further, in Vietnam in general, most intelligence came from human sources because of the intermingled nature of the war; thus a reminder of the importance of keeping ones eyes open was paramount. Surveillance was just one more ingredient that could serve to make the intelligence picture more accurate, and the more accurate the intelligence, the higher the likelihood that the enemy would be where intelligence said he was, and thus could be destroyed when forces found him.

Regarding counterinsurgency, the 1968 manual had a new chapter entitled “Stability Operations.” It greatly expands the scope of cavalry operations in support of stability operations. Whereas the counterinsurgency portion of the 1965 manual elaborated only under a sub-heading entitled “Tactical Operations,” emphasizing encirclement, raid, pursuit, ambush, and counterattack as the five offensive operations, the 1968 manual had an expanded mission paragraph, and better organized the tactical operations categories into reconnaissance, security, surveillance, offensive actions, and defensive. Plus, it adds two new categories of offensive *actions*, the search and clear, and economy of force, for a total of seven. Defensive actions included roadblocks, blocking positions, defense of units, installations and communities, and reinforcement of friendly units in contact.²⁴⁹ While in this instance doctrine still followed execution, the 1968 manual did a better job of codifying, and thus recognizing and legitimizing the actions on the ground, such as “search and clear.” However, interestingly enough, “search and

²⁴⁹ FM 17-36, Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units, 1968, 16-2. This particular defensive action, reinforcement of units in contact, is illustrative of the topsy-turvy nature of doctrine and execution during Vietnam for ground forces. It states that “reinforcement of units in contact is defensive mission employing offensive action.”

clear” was listed under offensive actions, not *reconnaissance*.²⁵⁰ This was another clue of the fusion of reconnaissance with the offense, borne out through doctrine following execution.

When adding economy of force as one of the seven offensive actions, the manual stated that cavalry units could support infantry operations in this role, and that cavalry could be used as a “maneuvering element, a direct and indirect fire support unit, or in any other role that helps infantry complete its mission.” Again, this is basically an open-ended invitation for cavalry to be ordered to do whatever needs to be done in order to defeat the enemy, while “categorizing” the action as an economy-of-force role.²⁵¹ Here was a drift toward economy of force actually meaning a force that is versatile enough to be used for virtually anything.

Going further, it is fair to believe that cavalry was given carte blanche to conduct all manner of missions partly because of a “can do” attitude, and the fact that the cavalry was repeatedly referred to as having an optimal task organization for missions in Vietnam. Consequently, it was to a large degree the victim of its own success. There *were* able to perform a wide array of missions in Vietnam because of their organic, innate capabilities, and because of this, because they *could*, they were used for just about everything. The manual conveys this by stating that “the support provided by armored cavalry can be decisive in accomplishing the supported forces mission,” and that “an aggressive commander will make every effort to find ways to negotiate such (difficult) terrain.”²⁵²

²⁵⁰ FM 17-36, 1968, 16-2.

²⁵¹ It might also be noted that in at least one other place in the 1968 manual, p. 13-6, there are other reference to the cavalry performing in a maneuver role – as a Division reserve, 13-6.

²⁵² FM 17-36, 1968, 16-9.

Economy of force was specified further in tongue-twisting fashion. In order to deny areas to the enemy, the manual stated that cavalry could conduct “area oriented reconnaissance in force as an economy of force.” The manual then clarified the concept somewhat by stating that when conducted in relatively open terrain, cavalry could play a decisive role in denying large areas to the enemy by constant movement and other offensive actions, freeing up infantry to concentrate on more restrictive terrain. The manual described this operation as one similar to a zone reconnaissance, covering a different portion of the area of operations each day, never using predictable patterns, and constantly interfering with the enemy. The confusing sounding line had much significance, however. The line was a doctrinal link to area-type operations, and like many other areas of this manual, it codified actions that were already going on in Vietnam. The line was another instance of doctrine following the execution curve. The manual finished its description of area-oriented reconnaissance by saying that it was “one of the best methods of employing the cavalry squadron in stability operations.”²⁵³ This emphasis on area operations may be a quick doctrinal reflection of the impact of Abrams’ change in strategy, which by its nature emphasized increasing small-unit, area operations closer to the population.

Economy of force goes even further, squeezing yet more functionality out of cavalry units. It stated that cavalry had the “capability of fighting in fortified and built-up areas, usually as an economy of force mission,” and further stated that “while (the cavalry is) not designed primarily for this type of employment, it can fight in built-up areas with infantry, in the same way as in conventional operations.”²⁵⁴ This tendency to keep piling

²⁵³ FM 17-36 Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units 1968, 16-9.

²⁵⁴ FM 17-36, 1968, 16-9 to 16-10.

on the tasks onto the cavalry was a sign that their contributions in Vietnam were significant; that things had come a long way since the days when people could not envision their role in the conflict. Scant years previously this statement might have been declared heresy. Now, economy-of-force had become the doctrinal “catch-all bag” category of the trinity, into which new missions that did not fit in reconnaissance or security could be put. These multiple interpretations of missions under the banner of economy of force were indicative of the elasticity of the cavalry doctrine, for better or worse.

Meanwhile, the term “search and clear” was finally listed in a cavalry doctrinal manual, outside of its mention in the 1966 FM 17-1 Armor Operations manual. In this version of 17-36, “search and clear” was the other new offensive action (the other being economy of force), and was described as a combination mission, combining “movement to contact, reconnaissance in force, and search (area reconnaissance) in order to destroy or capture all enemy in an assigned area or zone.”²⁵⁵ Here was the progeny of the politically sensitive “search and destroy” term, and another example of doctrinal codification following the execution “curve.” The term was also another example of a doctrinal link to area operations.

As the manual admitted, “search and clear,” as a type of an offensive action, was a hybrid of other cavalry missions, and defined using other doctrinal sub-tasks. This supported the theory that “search and destroy” and “search and clear” were overarching terms, used to convey *intent*, which conceivably made it less urgent that they be codified in doctrine. The fact that these two missions were composed of combinations of doctrinal missions and sub-tasks, therefore gave them, probably in the minds of many,

²⁵⁵ FM 17-36, 1968, 16-5 to 16-6.

enough doctrinal legitimacy to stand alone. Further, regarding these terms, perhaps it was felt that codifying them thoroughly, if at all, was not that urgent, since U.S. troops knew that they would not be in Vietnam for too long; that “this too shall pass.” Lastly, the terms defied true codification because of their overarching, broad nature, and the fact that variations of enemy and terrain were so great that any number of doctrinal templates could not work. Less specific, broader terms, subject to and conveying intent, may have been the answer.

The chapter on stability operations for division cavalry was first seen in the 1968 manual, no doubt taking the cue from the 1967 Stability Operations manual. The term “stability operations” was not present in the 1965 Division Cavalry manual. At that time, it was a “counterinsurgency operations” section as part of a “special operations” chapter. The 1968 chapter on stability operations moved toward specificity by using diagrams. The chapter had two diagrams, one for encirclement and one for a raid. There were also diagrams in an annex in the back in the battle drill section that depicted platoon drills in the event of an ambush. The diagrams showed the herringbone formation, and the compression tactic for fighting ambushes.²⁵⁶ This is a big change from 1965, which had no diagrams and much less in general on the topic of counterinsurgency. The level of emphasis and detail in “stability operations” would shift again, however.

The next Divisional Cavalry manual came out in 1973. The overall trend seemed to be that it was edging back to a trinity focus, inasmuch as it had ever left the trinity during the Vietnam era. There was little change to the overall mission statement at the front of the manual except that the carte blanche statement about use of the cavalry as a maneuver force in stability operations was gone. Reconnaissance in force and area

²⁵⁶ FM 17-36 Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units 1968, D-9.

reconnaissance disappeared as types of reconnaissance, replaced by the term “specific” reconnaissance.²⁵⁷ One possible reason the reconnaissance in force disappeared was that in the 1968, it was listed as one of the “subcomponent” missions that fell under the category of “search and clear.” Since “search and destroy” / “search and clear” terminology was used less, perhaps other missions that had previously made them up were taken out, such as reconnaissance in force. Further, with the U.S. forces withdrawal from Vietnam complete that year, it is possible that the drop-off in their conduct influenced the removal. Further, reconnaissance in force, as the definition in 1968 stated, was a “limited objective offensive mission.” This idea is contrary to the fundamentals of the reconnaissance, which requires that one “avoid decisive engagements.” The technical violation of this fundamental had been present since the earliest missions in Vietnam, and now perhaps doctrine was trying to creep back to the pre-war trinity emphasis, back in line with its own fundamentals. Indeed, by the 1977 manual, FM 17-95 Cavalry, this fundamental was gone, and in its place was “retain freedom to maneuver.”²⁵⁸

In further changes to the mission statement the manual removed the “types” of security - cover, protect, and screen – that had been added into the 1968 manual. The most important significance of this deletion is that whereas in 1968 there was a requirement of screening to engage the enemy, now screening returned to its definition in the traditional sense – no engaging the enemy directly. Again, cavalry doctrine appeared to be edging back to the trinity.

In the stability operations chapter, however, there are more substantial differences. The biggest initial difference is that the mission statement for stability

²⁵⁷ FM 17-36 Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron 1973, 1-3 to 1-5.

²⁵⁸ FM 17-95, Cavalry, 1977, 5-3.

operations became even more generic. The 1965 manual listed a whole host of non-doctrinal missions; by 1968, they were grouped according to reconnaissance, security, surveillance, and offensive and defensive operations. By 1973 the chapter stated that “specific missions should be those which directly counter the greatest enemy tactical threat.”²⁵⁹ By being generic, it seemed to also be returning to the trinity by leaving the tactical specifics to the conventional, tactical chapters. Further, the chapter put an emphasis on reconnaissance and offensive missions, stressing the ground and air cavalry work best together on this. It mentioned performing security, defensive, and support missions, but stated that these types of missions “do not take maximum advantage of the unit’s inherent capability.” This was an affirmation of the conduct of the cavalry in Vietnam – that while they conducted all types of missions in Vietnam, including many and varied security missions, they were at their best and best maximized when on the offense, when taking the fight to the enemy and thus taking advantage of their mobility, among other characteristics.

Overall, another big difference in the 1973 manual chapter on stability operations was that it provided the reader much more background and context. This was seemingly a positive development, although it had the effect of making the chapter seem almost as much a classroom reading assignment as a doctrinal manual. The chapter stated that the role of the military goals must be viewed in context of the larger goal - that of internal development and securing the support of the people. It further educated the cavalry leader about the “one war” concept, the idea that winning a war against an insurgency required much more work with the citizens and their needs, rather than relying totally on firepower and counting enemy bodies. It stated that the “objective of friendly tactical

²⁵⁹ FM 17-36 Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron, 1973, 15-2.

operations is to destroy insurgent forces and bases and establish a secure environment within which internal development is possible.”²⁶⁰ The 1968 version stated only that the “ultimate objective in operations against an insurgent force is to eliminate the insurgency and prevent its resurgence,” and says little else about the civilian considerations.²⁶¹ This “classroom” approach probably exists to help explain General Abrams’ emphasis on “one war,” which because of its greater emphasis on civil activities was probably best expressed this way. In addition, it was keeping with the trend of shrugging the specifics back to the tactical chapters, back to the trinity.

General Abrams’ emphasis on the “one war” was brought to the fore in the 1973 manual. The manual emphasized that civil-military operations are as important to the overall campaign goals as purely tactical operations. It defined civil-military operations as “stability operations, advisory assistance, civil affairs, psychological operations, intelligence operations, and population and resources control.” It stated that the cavalry must be prepared to conduct civil-military type missions when it “contributes to the accomplishment of assigned or *deduced* missions,” help keep civilians from interfering with military operations when necessary, and, more generically, “assist the commander in the discharge of his legal obligations with regard to the population of the area.”²⁶² These statements, while accurate, also reflect a broadness of scope in missions, and state the necessity of, at times, deduction, or drawing from the *intent* of the higher commander.

With further regard to the civilian aspect of the war, the 1973 version stated that tactical operations must be careful about causing collateral damage, and made clear the challenges of destroying an enemy without destroying everything else around it. It

²⁶⁰ FM 17-36 Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron 1973, 15-1.

²⁶¹ FM 17-36, Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units, 1968, 16-1.

²⁶² FM 17-36, 1973, 15-2.

advised discretion in the use of firepower, and delved deeper into the nature of fighting an insurgency as part of stability operations by spelling out the link between the guerilla and the population, noting insightfully that if this link was broken, then the guerilla became ineffective.

There was another interesting development that related to the conduct of area operations – a growing emphasis on the importance of familiarity and ownership. The 1968 manual stated that armored cavalry “dismounted elements” do not ordinarily conduct a zone reconnaissance in the pure sense during stability operations; rather, they “patrol selected areas” which permits the cavalry units to do three things: become familiar with the terrain, keep the enemy on the move, and disrupt his logistics.²⁶³ This reflected the 1968 change in strategy, which put more emphasis on smaller units, constantly patrolling, protecting the people and interdicting the enemy.

In the 1973 version, area operations doctrine gains more specificity. What drove most of the chapter on stability operations was a section that stated three basic principles of offensive operations, rather than the previous five and seven offensive actions in the 1965 and 1968 manuals, respectively. They were 1) develop reliable sources of intelligence; 2) take the initiative and keep it, and 3), develop the ability to rapidly concentrate forces on proven contact to destroy the guerilla forces before they escape. Regarding the first, in order to develop the reliable sources of information, it stated that armored cavalry squadron elements “do not ordinarily conduct zone recon or specific reconnaissance in stability operations, but are assigned an area of operation and patrol selected areas.”²⁶⁴ This was the closest to a definition and codification of area operations

²⁶³ FM 17-36, Divisional Armored and Air Cavalry Units, 1968, 16-3.

²⁶⁴ FM 17-36, Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron, 1973, 15-2.

yet. As if to reinforce this concept, the manual went on to specify that air cavalry was the “most effective organic information-gathering source,” and that it should be “assigned an area of operation and remain in that area as long as possible.”²⁶⁵ It further clarified cavalry’s role in area-type operations, a role that gradually proved essential and necessary in a war against insurgents.

Regarding the second principal, maintaining the initiative, it was usually gained by conducting “sustained troop or platoon clearing or patrol-type operations,” within the area of operations, to keep the guerillas off-balance.²⁶⁶ In order to do this, the manual authorized making patrol units as small as possible so as to be as widely dispersed as possible, without risking defeat in detail. The manual listed techniques such as using daylight reconnaissance patrols, coupled with night ambush patrols. The techniques were further examples of how doctrine followed the execution curve, and by default reinforced the area operations concept.

Interestingly enough, even when describing small unit actions in area operations, particularly reconnaissance, there was still no *one* trinity mission term used. Rather, area operations were still based on *blends* of other mission terms, such as “platoon clearing,” and “patrol type” operations. These descriptions were reminiscent of larger scale “search and destroy” missions, which were based on blends of other smaller, missions, and were never really defined in doctrinal manuals, certainly not in proportion to their use in official reports. Indeed, “search and destroy” / “search and clear” missions seemed to defy definition by any one conventional doctrinal mission sub-component – they seemed to always be blends. As presented in this manual, cavalry reconnaissance-type missions

²⁶⁵ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-3.

²⁶⁶ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-3.

in an area operations environment had license to do just about anything, even when operating on a much smaller scale and in a more decentralized manner. It appeared that commander's intent filled in the rest.

For the last principle, rapidly concentrating on the enemy once he was found, the manual describes the following scenario: once the enemy was detected by the air cavalry, the aero-rifle platoon was dropped in order to fix the enemy until ground cavalry or infantry was brought in to finish the destruction with fire and movement. The manual recognized that this is a form of piecemeal commitment, something that usual interpretations of the principles of war would not support, but in this instance, the manual essentially said that it was a good procedure based on the fact that letting the enemy get away was the worst case scenario. The manual also recognized the importance of unit standard operating procedures in this instance.²⁶⁷ The description accurately described a technique already used in Vietnam and known as "piling-on." The name was given to it by Colonel George S. Patton Jr., commander of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Vietnam, who became an advocate of the tactic. "Piling on" was a technique that was a function of area operations, which by their nature require dispersal of forces. Once the enemy was located, friendly forces rapidly converged to fix, encircle, and destroy the enemy before he could escape.²⁶⁸

Regarding the offensive actions, in the 1965 version there were five, and in the 1968 version, there were seven. In this manual, only ambush, raid, and reserve / population or resources control were mentioned. Gone was the mention of "search and clear," and gone was any attempt to try and lump operations under economy of force. Of

²⁶⁷ FM 17-36, Armored Cavalry, Platoon, Troop, and Divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron, 1973, 15-4, 15-5.

²⁶⁸ Colonel George S. Patton, Jr., "Pile On," *Armor* (March-April 1970) : 27-28.

the remaining three actions in the 1973 manual, the most significant change was the description of the ambush. Whereas this was traditionally an infantry task, and the 1968 version essentially said this, the 1973 version gave the armored cavalry vehicle ambush tacit approval. This was possible because the manual, no doubt reflective of experience, stated that “armored cavalry can be used [in an ambush situation] if imaginatively employed.” The secrecy in setting up an ambush site was achieved more by deception than stealth, mainly by random vehicle movement. Further, ambushes were possible at greater ranges because of the heavier weaponry, and it was possible to “obliterate” the enemy with greater firepower.²⁶⁹

With regard to security, the stability operations chapter of the 1973 manual mentioned that stability operations do not call for security operations in the traditional (conventional) sense, such as guard, screen, and cover, but there was a “heavy and constant security requirement” because there was no forward edge of battle or secure echelon. Because there were no front lines, the chapter referred to basic security requirements such as cavalry providing its own close-in security, but also included probable missions to provide security for lines of communications and installations. The chapter discussed escort missions and the establishment of mutually supporting strongpoints for more permanent route security. The chapter also cautioned that security missions should only be assigned when “more profitable offensive missions cannot be assigned.”²⁷⁰ The overall statement about security is a huge milestone, because it acknowledged that security operations were different in a stability operations environment, something that had been reality since 1965.

²⁶⁹ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-5.

²⁷⁰ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-6.

The chapter also confirmed a change in doctrine that further legitimized mission homogenization between trinity and maneuver missions. The chapter stated that “lightly armored vehicles of the armored cavalry squadron” can be used in “tank-like roles,” and that as a result of the relatively lightly armed enemy, the squadron could be “effectively employed on missions normally assigned to other combat maneuver elements.”²⁷¹ Before U.S. ground troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, ARVN troops learned to use the M113 armored personnel carriers in a tank-like role combat role. Rather than being used in its doctrinal role of transporting infantry and stopping short of the enemy to dismount the infantry, APC’s led the way and the infantry followed. This was a doctrinal switch. When the U.S. forces arrived, they continued and expanded the practice. The ACAVs that the cavalry used in the cavalry troops were customized with specially augmented with metal plates to protect the crew in order to help maximize these tactics. M113 ACAVs could attack on line with tanks in an assault, or carry dismounts into battle rather than doctrinally dismounting them prior to contact with the enemy. This modification of the ACAV, along with the superior firepower, mobility, and protection of the cavalry in proportion to a much more lightly armed enemy *enabled* cavalry to perform as maneuver units. Doctrine finally caught up to this reality and sanctioned it. These statements represented another carte blanche for the use of cavalry, and stated in even clearer language than the preceding division cavalry manuals that cavalry units could be used in non-trinity missions. The maneuver onus was not placed under the safe, all-encompassing banner of economy of force; rather, it stood brazenly all by itself.²⁷²

²⁷¹ FM 17-36, 1973, 15-1.

²⁷² The only issue here is the default acknowledgement that what enabled cavalry units to operate as maneuver units (and not necessarily in their doctrinal conventional trinity roles) is the fact that they were facing a relatively lightly armed enemy. This may be not telling the whole story. The fact was that there

Another important aspect of the 1968 and 1973 Division Cavalry manuals was that they stated up front that their doctrine was not “inflexible.” Rather, it was subject to intelligent interpretation based on the situation on the ground, and thus the judgment of the person in charge. The situation was judged based on factors of METT – Mission, Enemy, Terrain, and Troops. While this flexibility was certainly necessary and useful to make doctrine work in Vietnam even this flexibility was stretched to its limit. The statement was, however, an acknowledgment of the importance, and indeed necessity, of operating largely from intent. For the cavalry in Vietnam, doctrine followed execution and these manuals seemed to acknowledge that in the interim, the missions in Vietnam relied on new terminology that reflected and relied on intent, and rested on combinations and variations of doctrinal missions for legitimacy, to “get them through.”

The 1973 division cavalry manual reflected a proportionally big leap forward in trying to communicate the doctrine of fighting an insurgency as part of stability operations. This was accomplished with a holistic discussion of the topic of stability operations and the nature of fighting an insurgency, something that had heretofore been lacking. It also emphasized area operations, though still not specifically labeling them as such. Concomitant with this emphasis on area operations was the belief that units could “own” specific pieces of ground – the advantages of which were learning about the terrain, the inhabitants, being able to protect better close-in protection and being able to spot when something was amiss. The only drawbacks of the 1973 stability operations

were a number of other reasons why the cavalry was employed in maneuver role. One of the biggest was the nature of area warfare – the terrain and enemy in Vietnam – that caused adaptations beyond any that bothered to make predictions. The cavalry adapted to the terrain and enemy, along with all the other maneuver units, out of necessity, not out of choice. This also raises another interesting possibility: whether or not adding more U.S. ground forces units (not considering at this point whether that would have helped the overall war or not) would have freed up the cavalry to perform their trinity missions, if not exclusively, then at least more often.

chapter is that it became more generic with regard to tactics – there were no diagrams, and it was half the length of the 1968 manual. What it gained in presenting the holistic picture it lost in tactical specificity, of which there was not much to begin with.

There were other armor and cavalry doctrinal changes that came out after the overall change in strategy in 1969. One was Change 1 to the 1966 Armor Operations Manual, FM 17-1, which came out in August, 1969, and the other was the Change 1 to the 1966 ACR Manual, FM 17-95, which came out in March, 1970. The update to the armor manual added a chapter on Stability Operations, a change from the section the 1966 manual that had called it “Internal Defense Operations.” The update stated that “tactical operations are conducted in support of strike and consolidation campaigns. Offensive operations are conducted in an *assigned area of operation* to find, fix, and destroy or capture insurgents. Defensive operations, which are characterized by long duration, are conducted in an *assigned area of responsibility* to provide a secure environment in which positive effort can be devoted to internal development.”²⁷³ What these statements reflected was an emphasis on the area, reflecting the 1969 shift in strategy under Abrams. In spite of the change, there was the familiar “find, fix, and destroy,” the basic task of “search and destroy,” only now there was no mention of the terms “search and destroy” or “search and clear” as in the previous manual.

There were also two statements that continued to reflect mission homogenization between maneuver and trinity missions in a stability operations environment. One statement was that “reconnaissance, security, and surveillance tasks are inherent in all tactical operations in stability operations.”²⁷⁴ The other was that “armored cavalry may be

²⁷³ FM 17-1 Armor Operations Change 1, 1969, 34.

²⁷⁴ FM 17-1, 1969, 35.

used as separate maneuver units.”²⁷⁵ At this point in U.S. involvement in Vietnam, this was not the first time that the de facto homogenization of missions was recognized in doctrine, but the trend continued. Regarding the air cavalry, the manual stated regarding aerial search operations that “the air cavalry will reconnoiter from the air an assigned area, utilizing area and/or zone reconnaissance; or route, utilizing route reconnaissance, in search of the insurgent.”²⁷⁶ This statement was explicitly rooted in trinity tasks, something not seen in ground cavalry descriptions under stability operations. It was a clue that the air cavalry may have been a key factor in picking up the trinity missions of the cavalry.

The Change 1 to FM 17-95, The Armored Cavalry Regiment mainly addressed changes in task organization based on new equipment, but there were some updates to the section on stability operations, no longer entitled “counterinsurgency operations.” The stability operations section simply stated that “the primary mission of the regiment in stability operations is to conduct tactical operations against insurgent armed forces and their support facilities.”²⁷⁷ This was an open-ended statement, meaning that subject to interpretation, the whole spectrum of operations was open; that the armored cavalry regiment could conduct whatever operations were necessary, with the focus on the end result. The chapter then made a capstone statement that when cavalry accepted attachments such as infantry and then became a squadron task force, it may “then be employed extensively in roles normally assigned to tank and infantry battalions (rather than being restricted to the traditional roles of reconnaissance, security, or economy of force), in accordance with the tactical concepts of stability operations discussed in FM

²⁷⁵ FM 17-1, 1969, 38.

²⁷⁶ FM 17-1, 1969, 45.

²⁷⁷ FM 17-95 Armored Cavalry Regiment Change 1, 1970, 44.

17-1, FM 31-16, and FM 31-23.”²⁷⁸ This was a final, naked admission that in stability operations, cavalry units were authorized, doctrinally, to function as maneuver units. The doctrine had finally caught up with execution. The statement further implied that the mantle of the trinity mission of reconnaissance, in stability operations, had evolved to the air cavalry by stating that it (the air cavalry) is “ideally suited for reconnaissance missions and the rapid offensive operations conducted in stability operations.”²⁷⁹

The update then made the controversial statement that “the doctrine for employment of the regiment in conventional operations applies *equally* to stability operations. Specific tactics and techniques are derived to fit the operational environment and nature of the insurgent threat.”²⁸⁰ First, the doctrine for the trinity tasks did *not* apply *equally* in stability operations. Portions of the trinity doctrine did and various overarching principles may have, but by and large the stability operations and area war environment of Vietnam set the conventional trinity doctrine on its ear. The manual seemingly contradicted itself when it said that cavalry units, with attachments, “may then be employed extensively in roles normally assigned to tank and infantry battalions.” This last statement is clearly in contrast to the previous assertion that doctrine applied “equally.” As experience had shown, the cavalry clearly were mostly involved in multiple, non-trinity missions and tasks, as well as adaptations of trinity tasks, with a few exceptions.

The ACTIV Study

²⁷⁸ FM 17-95, 1970, 45.

²⁷⁹ FM 17-95, 1970, 45.

²⁸⁰ FM 17-95, 1970, 45.

During the later years of the war after General Abrams' change in strategy, the Army still grappled with the puzzle of Vietnam. A reflection of this was the Army Concept Team in Vietnam (ACTIV) Study was conducted during the period of October, 1969, through April 1970, and was approved for release in March of 1971. The ACTIV study was a follow-on to the MACOV study, and was entitled "Optimum Mix of Armored Vehicles for Use in Stability Operations." The study examined doctrine and execution in order to arrive at the other conclusions involving organization and equipment.

The results were illuminating but not surprising. Regarding the 11th ACR, the study found that in stability operations the unit was used as an offensive fighting unit to find and destroy the enemy, and that the "missions assigned to the regiment and to the regimental squadrons were typical of missions assigned to mechanized and armored units in RVN."²⁸¹ This finding spelled out the earlier definition of "search and destroy," and it also supported the idea that the regiment was used primarily as another maneuver unit. The finding also lent credibility to the idea that the innate organization and capabilities of the cavalry unit made it susceptible for use to accomplish any task or mission. By that standard, the regiment had become, in effect, a jack of all trades.

When listing the types of missions that the regiment conducted, the study acknowledged that "types of missions have been grouped into broad categories for simplicity and to avoid confusion in terms (for example, the doctrinally accepted term "reconnaissance in force" was called by several different names in Vietnam, ranging from "search and destroy" to "protective reaction")." This meant that the reconnaissance category included all any missions where the regiment was out looking for the enemy.

²⁸¹ ACTIV Study, G-1.

Each squadron conducted reconnaissance operations 55%, 51%, and 50% (1st, 2nd, and 3rd squadrons respectively) of the time, while they conducted security missions 16%, 22%, and 23% of the time respectively. Thus, the “reconnaissance” category composed the majority of the missions conducted during the time frame of the study, while security missions were the next largest grouping.²⁸² However, the study stated that though the majority of missions were reconnaissance in force missions, “several other terms were used on occasion.”²⁸³ For the regiment, the next largest category in terms of aggregate time spent was security, road clearing, followed by ready reaction force, maintenance, other, and civic action.

The study also found that the regiment usually conducted operations the majority of the time at troop level, within the regimental area of operations. They did not usually go below troop level, as was the case in other areas of Vietnam with other units, because of the thick jungle and the proximity to the Cambodian border brought with them the increased likelihood of sizeable enemy contact. Regarding security operations, the 11th ACR conducted them on an almost daily basis, and most of these consisted of security of convoys, engineer work parties, fire support bases, and populated areas.²⁸⁴

The study also pointed out that the squadrons conducted night ambushes / strong points on average 12% of the time; the other nights the troops usually established night defensive positions.²⁸⁵ These night defensive positions (NDPs) were established by mounted units from the earliest days in Vietnam when out in the field at night. Because

²⁸² ACTIV Study, G-2, G-3. The rest of the mission categories were “Ready Reaction Force,” “Maintenance Stand Down,” “Civil Action,” “Road Clearing,” and “Other.” Civil Action had the lowest frequency, followed by Other, Maintenance Stand Down, Ready Reaction Force, with Road Clearing being the third most conducted category across the board.

²⁸³ ACTIV Study, G-5.

²⁸⁴ ACTIV Study, G-8.

²⁸⁵ ACTIV Study, G-4.

of the nature of the terrain and the enemy, these positions emphasized tight perimeters for security purposes to keep the enemy out and to keep the unit together. This was an accepted and acknowledged change from doctrine which usually called for dispersion in the defense in order to not present a harder target for the enemy.

The study showed that division cavalry squadrons' traditional roles and missions, as defined by doctrine, were also modified in Vietnam, but not as much as the 11th ACR's. Although used in a variety of missions, their three basic methods of employment were as combat maneuver battalions operating in an assigned area of operations; as economy of force elements screening or securing a large area; and as a "fire brigade," moving as needed to the greatest point of need in the division area of operations. They typically operated under the operational control of a maneuver brigade, and typically operated without their air cavalry squadrons, which were detached to higher.²⁸⁶

The study looked at the percentages of the types of missions they conducted as well.²⁸⁷ The study found that 1-1 Cavalry conducted reconnaissance missions 56% of the time; 2-1 Cavalry 53%; 3-4 Cavalry 75%; and 3-5 Cavalry 64%. In aggregate, their next largest chunk of time was on maintenance, followed by security operations, road clearing, ready reaction force, and civic action.²⁸⁸ Similar to the regiment, the squadrons conducted missions in troop size almost exclusively, though one frequently conducted platoon size operations. They divided into troop areas of operation, and then subdivided them down into platoon areas of operation. Regarding security operations, the percentage of time devoted to them varied from CTZ to CTZ, based on the terrain. The heavier the

²⁸⁶ ACTIV Study, H-1.

²⁸⁷ 1-4 Cavalry was not available for data, the study notes, because they were redeploying. As the first division cavalry squadron to Vietnam, it was their time to finally leave. Also, 1-10 cavalry was not visited for the study.

²⁸⁸ ACTIV Study, H-3.

vegetation, the more security was pulled, but overall they worked the same security missions as the ACR, and conducted some type of security mission daily. The most common security missions were road clearing, route security, security of populated areas, and security of fixed and semi-fixed installations.²⁸⁹

The ACTIV report was partly a final check on the status of MACOV recommendations, and partly a study by itself. The recommendations of both studies mostly centered on finding the best task organization and equipment for the cavalry and other mounted units. The doctrine and missions being conducted were part of the study in order to set the framework for any organizational and equipment changes – not necessarily to study doctrine versus execution and then make recommendations along those lines. However, the findings of the missions and doctrine were significant.

The ACTIV study findings reiterated that cavalry units were conducting missions outside their trinity parameters. The majority of missions being conducted by the cavalry were labeled reconnaissance, but the study acknowledged that the term “reconnaissance” was not in its traditional sense, but was used to represent a much broader range of missions. It even stated that a doctrinally accepted term such as “reconnaissance in force” was called several things, from “search and destroy” to “protective reaction.”²⁹⁰ What happened in Vietnam was that almost any mission that sought out the enemy actively was labeled under the “reconnaissance” category, whatever the actual mission was; missions that provided unit or base security were put under the category of “security.” There was no category of economy of force, though there was reference to it as one of the three “basic methods of employment” of division cavalry squadrons, used to

²⁸⁹ ACTIV Study, H-6.

²⁹⁰ ACTIV Study, G-1.

screen or secure a large area.²⁹¹ This tied in with a country-wide economy of force concept, whereby the mobility of the cavalry were able to patrol a large area, freeing up other forces such as infantry to accomplish their mission elsewhere.

The findings also helped confirm the concept of mission homogenization, and expansion of the term “reconnaissance.” In addition to the cavalry, the study, like the MACOV, examined other mounted units such as armor and mechanized infantry. What the study found was that in the case of 2 of the 3 armor battalions studied, the majority of their missions were considered reconnaissance missions, just like the cavalry, and with the same understanding of the broad meaning of reconnaissance. Reconnaissance actually meant “to find and destroy the enemy, and to deny him fixed operating bases or access to populated areas.” Thus, missions were of similar intent, if not identical, to “search and destroy” missions of earlier years. The additional difference was in the “denial” aspect, which put missions more in line with the Abrams shift in strategy, whereby security of the people and denial of them to the enemy was as important as finding and destroying the enemy. There was also a sense that under the umbrella of reconnaissance was also show of force and denying the enemy freedom of movement.²⁹² Thus, presence alone, in the right areas, was now a factor. This was also another addition to the meaning of reconnaissance.

The Cambodian Invasion

Just as cavalry trinity missions were modified for the war in Vietnam, the usual missions were occasionally punctuated by significant, large-scale operations that utilized mounted forces like CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY in 1967, and Tet in 1968.

²⁹¹ ACTIV Study, H-1.

²⁹² ACTIV Study, K-7.

Under General Abrams, one operation that was a long time in coming was a proposal to raid into Cambodian border sanctuaries with U.S. and ARVN troops in order to destroy enemy and supply stockpiles. President Nixon approved it, and on 1 May, 1970, 20,000 U.S. and allied troops attacked into Cambodia.²⁹³ While the invasion itself was successful in terms of enemy logistical stockpiles wiped out and the estimated damage it did to the enemy's long term ability to infiltrate South Vietnam, the resulting political damage to the Nixon Administration was worse. As part of this, the invasion was curtailed soon after it began, with deadlines given to the troops to be out of Cambodia by 30 June, and troops limited to 30 kilometers inside the border, by presidential decree.²⁹⁴

The cavalry played a significant role in the invasion. For them, the invasion was largely an example of operating under the old conventional, trinity tactics, and it was a chance for them to "stretch their legs." The 11th ACR participated in the invasion, and it was one of the few times during their time in Vietnam that they fought together. In fact, the 3rd Squadron traveled over 300 kilometers to link up with the other two squadrons prior to the invasion. For most of the invasion, two of the squadrons performed a mission similar to a doctrinal, advance guard security mission, leading the invasion in some areas, racing in the lead to reconnoiter and secure key routes, crossroads, and villages. In the case of one particular city, Snuol, which was discovered to be a significant logistics hub location, the regiment was able to surround it and rout the enemy by using two squadrons in a joint attack, in conjunction with the air cavalry. The remaining squadron's primary mission was to secure lines of communication back to War Zone C, and later they conducted search missions. Another cavalry unit, 3-4 Cavalry, acted in its doctrinal role

²⁹³ Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 562.

²⁹⁴ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 169.

as the divisional cavalry squadron for 25 ID. It led the 25th ID into Cambodia in conjunction with mechanized infantry units, and helped them set up blocking positions for the benefit of ARVN forces.²⁹⁵

The end state of the invasion was that it bought time for the forces back in South Vietnam by interfering with the enemy's usual preparations in the border sanctuaries. It helped buy time for the U.S. withdrawals, and the building up of the South Vietnamese forces. The invasion resulted in the capture of almost 10,000 tons of food and materiel, and killed over 11,000 enemy soldiers, while capturing 2,000.²⁹⁶ The invasion was also a reminder of the abilities of cavalry to perform in roles closer to their more traditional, trinity roles, and necessity to be able to do so. They truly had become a "jack of all trades."

²⁹⁵ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 174-175.

²⁹⁶ Starry, *Mounted Combat*, 180.

CHAPTER IV

THE METAMORPHOSIS EXAMINED

In the end, there was a metamorphosis of armored cavalry's mission execution in Vietnam in relation to their traditional, conventional doctrine. The largest part of it was due to necessity. The cavalry *had* to adapt their tactics and doctrine because of the demands of area warfare, which in turn resulted from a largely insurgent enemy and less-than-optimal terrain for armor. Area warfare required adaptation from conventional doctrine, because it resulted in area operations, which unlike conventional doctrine, had no front lines, and rarely any massed enemy formations to strike. Area operations in turn, by their very nature, tended to result in "homogenized" missions, and any combat units, no matter what their specialty, had to adapt. The problem of adapting to area operations from a conventional mindset was exacerbated by strategy and policy considerations, which kept U.S. forces in South Vietnam in a type of "fishbowl" type of environment, continually circling and looking for the enemy. They did this instead of penetrating in into the heart of the enemy's vitals where crucial logistical support for the war was allowed to flourish, in areas such as border sanctuaries in Cambodia and even North Vietnam.²⁹⁷ The Cambodian invasion was a brief glimpse of how the cavalry would operate in such a situation – more according to conventional doctrine.

²⁹⁷ Fears of widening the war and political expediency held this option hostage, though at one point in the war, when the U.S. bombed North Vietnam as part of Operation LINEBACKER, there was, as one historian noted, a notable lack of interest displayed on the parts of China and the Soviet Union.

Part of the metamorphosis from trinity doctrine to very different execution was due to timing – a surprise and an accidental introduction of armored ground forces to Vietnam. The deployment of mounted forces to Vietnam took the Army by surprise, despite some warnings to the contrary, such as the 1962 counterinsurgency study. The “unanticipation” of armored, mounted forces’ potential role in Southeast Asia or in a counterinsurgent environment was exacerbated by mythologies that were not dispelled until they were proven wrong. This may have led to lack of planning for cavalry as part of a coherent, strategic plan – a problem that arguably plagued the entire war effort. To further inhibit anticipating armored cavalry’s role in a counterinsurgent environment was the environment in Vietnam – the nature of the enemy, the terrain, and the civil aspect of the war were all hard to define separately, let alone all together. The terrain was thought to be inhospitable to mounted forces, and defining an insurgency was an open-ended challenge. Once they could be figured out, it was a challenge to figure out how to best fight, as evidenced by changes in strategy and tactics. In the final analysis, the definition of an insurgency was portrayed doctrinally in the stability operations manual as a revolutionary war, inspired by Mao and Lenin, and conducted in phases, but this was just one definition of an insurgency among many.²⁹⁸

Part of the reason for the metamorphosis may have been due to the fact that the whole nation was not mobilized for war – a political decision that had military and tactical ramifications. What this meant in the short term was that if there had been more units to conduct maneuver missions, then that might have better freed up cavalry to

²⁹⁸ There are still disagreements as to what type of insurgency it was to this day, and probably always will be. There are also major disagreements as to whether the war was really a conventional war in insurgency clothing (the wolf in sheepskin), if it truly was a revolutionary war, or if was a non-revolutionary insurgency.

conduct missions akin to the trinity missions, such as trinity screening missions along the borders for example (though the terrain there was much more rugged and less optimal for mounted operations). Because there never seemed to be enough troops there, more was asked of and indeed forced out of the units that *were* there. Along these lines, part of it may have been that the cavalry was a victim of its own success – that its own innate attributes and characteristics *allowed* it to be used for just about everything. The cavalry was used for almost everything because it *could*. This aspect also may have been enabled by a series of other organizations and innovations such as the air cavalry that helped supplant, and indeed mask the lack of cavalry performing their traditional tasks.

Perhaps part of the reason for the metamorphosis between doctrine and execution may have been that discretion may have truly been seen as the better part of valor. To stick with the conventional doctrinal terminology and not overly seek the true doctrinal roots of cavalry's operations was the safest path, and easier. Not making an issue of execution differing from doctrine would not “rock the boat,” and it was easier to claim to operate within established doctrine than to put effort into new doctrine and then get burned. This may be why there are numerous references by commanders in reports from the war to the effect that although operations were changing and adapted, “current doctrine remains valid.” Even some doctrinal manuals went so far as to say the same thing! In any event, it was true that the situation in Vietnam would certainly not totally nullify or replace the trinity doctrine, since the war in Vietnam was arguably not truly a war with immediate life or death consequences for the U.S., and to add to that, the majority of the Army was still preparing to defend Europe as part of the Cold War. As if to give credence to the claim that the trinity doctrine was still valid, one of the damning

aspects of Vietnam was that there was always the *threat* of conventional, NVA forces, and cavalry did engage the enemy on a large scale, similar to conventional operations, on several occasions.

Part of the metamorphosis between doctrine and execution may have been an over reliance on technology and firepower, creating in the words of David R. Palmer a “phalanx of fire.” A reliance on technology and firepower was an outgrowth of the attrition strategy that characterized the first few years of the war under General Westmoreland – one that emphasized enemy body count in relation to U.S. body count. Thus, the trend began, counter to doctrine, that, rather than closing with and destroying the enemy, contact was made and then as much firepower as possible was dumped on the enemy; generally, maneuver units *found* the enemy, and firepower destroyed him. Fire and maneuver had become maneuver and fire.²⁹⁹ This aspect had two other effects. First, a faith and reliance on technology may have masked or delayed true efforts to evaluate doctrine in light of Vietnam, once it was discovered that conventional, ground forces would head to Vietnam en masse. Under those circumstances, the thought may have been, conduct the “search and destroy” and once you find the enemy, dump all hell on him. Thus, the art and science of maneuver, hampered already by elusive, small groups of enemy and thick jungle terrain in many areas, was allowed to languish at the expense of firepower and technology. Under those circumstances, in a war that may have been seen as temporary anyway, doctrinal maneuver was not given the thought and attention it deserved. Secondly, the switching of emphasis to a reliance on technology and firepower created part of the mess at the end of the war, which General DePuy sought to remedy

²⁹⁹ David R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.- Vietnam in Perspective*. (Novato, CA : Presidio Press, 1978), 144-147.

with his 1976 version of 1976 of FM 100-5 Operations – a move back to the basics, and a move to forget what had been learned in Vietnam because in reality, he was right. A lot of what had become expedient in Vietnam was not doctrinal, and *would* get soldiers killed in a conventional battle in Europe. From this one might draw the conclusion, and understandably so, that once ground troops got to Vietnam and were in the thick of a peculiar and unfamiliar fighting environment for which training and doctrine had minimally prepared them for, concern with doctrine largely ceased, and the military did what was necessary to fight and win in a strange war in a strange land. They resorted to firepower, and modified conventional doctrine. Expediency thus superseded doctrine. There may have been little choice.

From one perspective, the Army did seem to make an effort to find itself doctrinally during the Vietnam War. The studies were one example, but further evidence of this was seen in proliferation of other manuals in the late 1960's, such as the counterinsurgent manuals, counterguerilla manuals, and others: Civil Affairs Operations, Psychological Operations, Jungle Operations, Night Operations, and Border Security/Anti-Infiltration Operations. However, these manuals were probably not widely circulated, nor did they probably have much effect on the operations in the field since most came out during the war. In some senses, the Army may have been suffering from *too much* doctrine in its efforts to come to grips with the complexity of the war in Vietnam, while in the midst of growing technological improvements, dissent at home, and poorly articulated policy and strategy objectives at the highest levels.

The doctrine that came closest to possibly nailing down what the Army needed to do comprehensively with regard to Vietnam was the stability operations manual.

However, the manual was largely contextual and was not very helpful for combat units in depicting to the level of detail necessary regarding any doctrinal tactical operations against insurgencies, let alone adaptations of conventional doctrine. This was particularly true with regard to the Vietnam equivalent of reconnaissance: “search and destroy” missions. There were almost no diagrams devoted to hypothetical or real doctrinal situations of it, or any others, in either the stability operations manual or the cavalry doctrine. More detailed doctrinal depiction was an overall shortfall, not only for training and execution during the Vietnam era, but also for codifying doctrinal tactics and techniques for future reference.

The lack of detail in the new stability operations manuals and the newer versions of the cavalry and armor manuals could be explained by several possibilities. One was that each assumed that the other would carry the detail necessary, and neither truly did. Another possibility was that many of the missions in Vietnam rested on adaptations of trinity missions; therefore, knowing the basics of the trinity missions was “good enough.” The rest could be covered on the ground in Vietnam. Another possibility is that the overarching, broad mission terminology, such as “search and destroy,” was legitimate enough in that it allowed each mission to rely on *intent* of the commander, and was further legitimized by the fact that sub-tasks of “search and destroy” were doctrinal, such as reconnaissance in force, or movement to contact. Another possibility as to why there was an overall lack of detail in defining and depicting such Vietnam-specific operations as the “search and destroy” is that terms such as the “search and destroy” were simply not definable or able to be depicted in the doctrinal sense because they relied on intent and could consist of so many variations. The many variations were based on the differing

terrain of the CTZs, the different levels of enemy, civil considerations, and the fact that the whole range of maneuver and cavalry forces conducted them, so no one proponent had the “rose” pinned on them to develop the doctrine. To define terms such as “search and destroy” doctrinally was a challenge, because it was an amalgamation of reconnaissance with offensive operations. Lastly, “search and destroy” missions were called by many different names, by different units, at different times. What stayed the same, however, was relatively simple: find the enemy and his installations, fix him, and destroy him. Lastly, doctrine, to the extent that it did change, may not have put in more detail on purpose, in order not to prescribe the solutions, because the situation in Vietnam seemed to defy any one solution. Using broad, overarching terms such as “search and destroy” may have helped foster use of intent.

Despite an overall lack of doctrinal depiction of new operations and missions in Vietnam such as “search and destroy,” the cavalry used what they knew. They used basic doctrinal principles and tasks of traditional trinity missions, as well as basic warfighting skills, and then operated within and according to the commander’s intent. The best example was the “search and destroy” mission. According to studies, these “reconnaissance” missions were alternately called many things, but no single doctrinal, conventional trinity term could accurately describe the search and destroy mission, yet the term was widely listed in reports. At the same time, the terms “search and clear” and “search and destroy” barely appear in the doctrine of the time. They first appear in the 1966 17-1 Armor Operations manual, but by 1973 Stability Operations, they were gone.³⁰⁰ The term then became “strike operations.” However, “strike operations” did not

³⁰⁰ FM 17-1, Armor Operations, 1966, 221. Here it says under the Internal Defense Section that there are two general categories of operations which will be conducted in an insurgency operational environment -

appear doctrinally in documents describing ground cavalry action in Vietnam, so theoretically it never made it to the field, into the lexicons of the officers on the ground writing the reports. What was happening was that terms used by cavalry units in the field, particularly “search and destroy” and “search and clear,” were barely reflected doctrinally, while terms that *were* coined doctrinally, such as “strike operations,” were barely seen in after-action documents or used by units in the field. This suggests that lack of detailed doctrinal depiction may not have mattered that much. Units in the field used what they knew and used the terminology that most accurately reflected their mission on the ground, regardless of what doctrine said. The two, doctrine and execution, seemed to be missing each other.

In the end, terms such as “search and destroy” were used because they most accurately described the *intent* of the operation – find the enemy, fix him (and his installations), and destroy them. In the chaotic war environment, intent was probably enough provided there were some basic warfighting skills that lay beneath it. The cavalry, among others, possessed these additional skills, as well as fantastic capabilities, and they went to work. Intent was enough to take immediate action, which is what the situation demanded. The cavalry could not sit and wait, arms crossed, on updated doctrinal manuals to make their way down to them, and lament that their role in a counterinsurgent environment was not planned for.

As it was, the “search and destroy” and the “search and clear” appeared only briefly, and not widely, in doctrine, in contrast to their publicity and use in after action

strike operations and clear, hold, and consolidation operations. Regarding strike operations is says “variously called search and clear, search and destroy, and others...are primarily tactical operations.” “Strike ops are conducted primarily to find, fix, and destroy insurgent tactical forces, and they may also be used to harass insurgent forces.” “Strike operations are comprised of raids, RIF, coordinated attacks, relief operations, or combinations of these.”

reports. They were doctrinally ephemeral.³⁰¹ It was almost as if the operations in Vietnam defied codification; that the commander's intent was good enough, and the doctrine writers recognized this. It may also be that "search and destroy" was not codified because there were so many versions of it, by units at different levels, on differing terrain, and facing different enemy formations. According to Major Robert Doughty, indeed, regarding "search and destroy," "no fixed model existed for such operations."³⁰² It may have been that few were pressing for doctrinal codification. This may have been largely based on the fact that tactics and techniques used by the units, to the extent that they were new, were lucky to get codified in units SOPs such as 1-4 Cavalry's. Any ambivalence that may have existed among doctrine writers may have been aided by the fact that the war in Vietnam was seen as a passing war; it would not last. Certainly the mindset before the war among many senior armor professionals did not help. Their line of thinking was to stay away from the Vietnam topic – it was an infantryman's war, and was in a far away, jungle country. Consequently it was best to stay out of there and not spend much time worrying over it. Along these lines perhaps doctrine writers and those in charge of them took comfort in knowing that the conflict in Vietnam was not the true, conventional threat – that the potential, conventional conflict in Europe was the greatest threat, and that therefore as long as doctrine addressed worst case scenario then all was okay.

In the end, armored cavalry saw a metamorphosis from the doctrinal trinity of traditional cavalry missions based on conventional warfare – reconnaissance, security,

³⁰¹ The term "search and destroy" is only in the 1966, 17-1 Armor Operations Manual, in the Internal Defense Operations section. Of note, the term "strike operations" is also found here, one of a few places.

³⁰² Major Robert A. Doughty, "The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-1976." (Ft. Leavenworth, KS : U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1979), 48. He also mentioned that in 1968, the "search and destroy" was, as General Westmoreland noted, "equated in the American public mind with aimless searches in the jungle and destruction of property." Doughty went on to say that "the original term was sometimes carelessly used in a blanket fashion to describe almost any kind of offensive operation."

and economy of force - to various other missions. Many of these other missions could be linked in some form or fashion to the closest version of the trinity missions, and collected under that respective category. This was particularly true with regard to reconnaissance. As the ACTIV study showed, the “reconnaissance” category included a wide range of missions ranging from the “search and destroy” to the doctrinal “reconnaissance in force” to “combat reconnaissance” to “protective reaction.” At the heart of all of these, perhaps the term “search and destroy” best captures the commander’s *intent* for these missions, and that was eloquently summed in the “four f’s” phrase of “find ‘em, fix ‘em, fight ‘em and finish ‘em.”³⁰³ The main difference between the metamorphosis of cavalry in Vietnam from that of World War II was that in the latter, cavalry went in with one set of expectations, and came out with very different ones, with different doctrine to legitimize the changes, and largely tied to organizational reorganizations during the war. In Vietnam, execution was different from the doctrine going in, but this metamorphosis did not greatly affect doctrine during the war, nor did doctrinal changes as a result of the war stay. In fact, cavalry doctrine became even more strongly rooted in the trinity, with little to no mention of the experiences gained in Vietnam.³⁰⁴ The experiences of stability operations stayed were relegated to peripheral manuals.

While the studies were informative and useful, there was institutional resistance to doctrinal changes to reflect current “best practice” methods. The Continental Army Command (CONARC) refused to let some doctrinal updates occur that Fort Knox and the

³⁰³ Major (P) Craig S. Harju, Sr. White Paper, “A Study of the Maneuver Battalion Reconnaissance or Scout Platoon. (Ft. Knox, KY : U.S. Army Armor School), 47.

³⁰⁴ The only manuals where the experiences of Vietnam seemed to truly linger were in the ancestors of the stability operations manual, seemingly relegated to peripheral status, and which by 1981 was labeled “low-intensity conflict.” The manual itself is FM 100-20, Low Intensity Conflict, January 1981.

MACOV study group wanted to see implemented.³⁰⁵ CONARC's reasoning was that by the time that some of the doctrinal "best practices" were codified, such as leading infantry with the M113's, or riding them into contact as opposed to dismounting short of the enemy or objective, the practice would be overcome by events. The enemy in the meantime surely would have acquired better weaponry to render the temporary doctrinal aberration obsolete. This was shortsighted, almost in line with a civilian book publisher's concern. It also may be a sign of general reluctance to alter doctrine because Vietnam was still perceived as a short term aberration. Part of the reluctance to accept recommendations for doctrinal change may have been the perception that doctrine was "still valid," from reading reports from Vietnam. In any event, CONARC's perspective may have been due partly to the fact that sometimes "best practices" were enshrined in memorandums disseminated for learning purposes, in SOPs, or other mediums in lieu of doctrine.

To elaborate further on the concept of whether doctrine was valid, it was acknowledged that missions were conducted, by and large, differently in Vietnam due to the area war, and a litany of other reasons previously listed. However, to say that "doctrine is still valid" is both a truism, but also incomplete and somewhat misleading. It was a truism in that certainly all doctrine was not invalidated by the experiences in

³⁰⁵ Maj. J. Bryan Mullins. "Defining the Core Competencies of U.S. Cavalry," (M.M.S. Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), 45. According to Major Paul Herbert, in his Leavenworth Paper entitled "Deciding what has to be done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM-100-5, Operations," CONARC was created in 1962 to oversee all Army activities in the continental United States, and as part of its responsibilities oversaw the operation of the Army's training bases and schools. (p. 35). Under General DePuy, CONARC was eventually broken into two parts, which became TRADOC – the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command which is still around in 2005, and FORSCOM – Forces Command, also still around. TRADOC also assumed the functions of the U.S. Army Combat Developments Command, "a separate command from CONARC whose field agencies had always been collocated with, but bureaucratically separated from, the Army schools. (p. 35) CDC's focus was on researching new techniques of land warfare, based on equipment capabilities.

Vietnam. To think that or to make that so would have been folly. Certainly the military would not “throw out” conventional doctrine in its entirety, the trinity missions of the cavalry. Indeed, one of the challenges of Vietnam for the military was that they had to be prepared, in most cases, to handle any conventional formations that the enemy decided to use. However, even in light of this fact, most conventional doctrine did not apply in Vietnam either in name, or in intent, without major modifications. This was true with the trinity missions of the cavalry.

The statement that “doctrine is still valid” was also incomplete. It does not tell the whole story, in that a lot of the new, overarching missions conducted, such as “search and destroy” and “search and clear” were predicated and based on numerous other doctrinal tasks that made them up, such as movement to contact, reconnaissance in force, and other economy of force missions such as attack. The statement is also incomplete in that “search and destroy” missions were conducted at the platoon level, but even here their actions were still based on doctrinal subtasks, such as reaction to contact and conduct fire and maneuver. The statement is misleading because it can create the belief that if doctrine is valid, then what are the issues or problems? The speed reader might read “doctrine is valid” and turn the page. The statement that doctrine “is still valid” can cause a failure to examine thoroughly for lessons learned or find a need to change doctrine by instilling complacency in readers. A statement such as that could mislead readers, causing them less pain and effort than they might otherwise experience than if they read statements such as “doctrine does not adequately address....,” or “doctrine is lacking,” or “we were operating outside of doctrine.” The accompanying affects of

reading statements such as these open a “pandora’s box” of trouble, the implications being that officers and soldiers are not trained for their missions.

Reasons why doctrine did not change more than it did may be partly due to largely decentralized, smaller-unit operations, especially after General Abrams took command of MACV. This resulted in tactics, techniques and procedures being developed at mainly small unit level, since this was the level that most contacts took place. By this definition, small units were brigade/regiment and below, and they conducted the bulk of the effort of the war.³⁰⁶ Changes that small units made and discoveries as to what worked made it into local SOPs, but many did not make it into doctrine, as evidenced by the cursory attention given “search and destroy” and “search and clear” in doctrinal manuals, and the lack of specificity and illustrations, for example, in chapters dealing with stability operations or counterinsurgency operations. Consequently, the small unit actions did not receive the big unit attention they may have gotten otherwise. Furthermore, the decentralized nature of operations resulted in far-flung small unit actions, spread among the varying terrain and enemy situations in Vietnam, with different small units conducting different types or variations of tactics that worked according to that particular terrain, enemy, and commander’s personality. While there were calls to “expand” doctrine and incorporate “lessons learned,” that was mainly it, and in the immediate aftermath of the war, the collective weight of other factors distracted the Army from a good, thorough doctrinal evaluation.

Another reason for lack of overall doctrinal change was the idea of doctrinal “no-mans land.” The environment leading up to the Vietnam War in the early 1960s was already in doctrinal flux; thus U.S. entry into the war was already on a shifting doctrinal

³⁰⁶ Major Robert A. Doughty, “The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine,” 47.

foundation. Once U.S. ground forces entered the war, they found that Vietnam was a situation unlike the any other the U.S. Army had ever faced, at one time. In the words of Generals Ira Hunt and Julian Ewell, “the war and its total environment were so foreign to classical western experience, military and civilian, that one could not grasp it well at the time, much less understand it.”³⁰⁷ The cavalry and the larger Army were caught up in an unusual situation of fighting a spectrum of enemy, from guerrillas to conventional units, while simultaneously trying to secure and develop the civilian population and train the Vietnamese Army. These multiple challenges, coming at times from all points of the spectrum, may have, in effect, “frozen” doctrine in a no-man’s land, where the safest course of action was to maintain what you had, not to move too much in any one direction. To the extent that people realized this, doctrine failing to predict and prepare cavalry prior to the war or perfectly adapt during the war, may have been seen as acceptable in light of the multitude of challenges the army was facing. From this perspective, it is little wonder that execution led doctrine.

Arguably, doctrine did not get it right for cavalry prior to the war because overall doctrinal change was collapsing under its own weight. The Army was experiencing turbulence already in the early 1960’s with the change to the ROAD divisions, and when counterinsurgency was added to mix, it was a great deal of change in a short period of time. What all the change meant was that the Army was not prepared in doctrine or equipment for a counterinsurgent environment such as Vietnam, largely because there was so much other change happening around the same time, doctrinally and organizationally. A study around that time said that “the tactical doctrine for the

³⁰⁷ Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell and Major General Ira A. Hunt, *Vietnam Studies, Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment*. (Washington, D.C. : Department of the Army, 1974), p. 7.

employment of regular forces against insurgent guerrilla forces has not been adequately developed, and the Army does not have a clear concept of the proper scale and equipment necessary for these operations.”³⁰⁸

To compound the problem, there was institutional resistance on the part of the Army to changing doctrine and taking other measures. In the opinion of one officer, one of the biggest obstacles to sitting down at the table and really figuring out how to tackle counterinsurgent warfare was the foot dragging of many of the army officers in leadership positions, most of whom knew only nuclear or conventional tactical doctrine. Michael Lind, in his book *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, pointed out the military’s response to President Kennedy’s pressure to understand and prepare for counterinsurgency warfare was to “dismiss it as a fad.”³⁰⁹ Three successive high ranking Army generals in the early 1960s said that Kennedy was “oversold” on the concept; that “any good soldier can handle guerrillas”; and that “any well-trained organization can shift the tempo to that which might be required in this [counterinsurgency] situation.” Another army officer and instructor at West Point stated “the U.S. Army blocked organizational learning during—and after—the Vietnam War.”³¹⁰ Years after the war, retired General Starry, author of *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* and former commander of the 11th ACR in Vietnam, proposed that part of the problem with managing change in the Army was that the Army had not equipped itself with rigorous staff officers of the caliber of the German

³⁰⁸ Maj. Robert Doughty, “The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine,” 40.

³⁰⁹ Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*. (N.Y : Touchstone, 1999), 103.

³¹⁰ Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, 103-104.

general staff officer corps of World War II.³¹¹ Perhaps this might have helped rescue an Army that seemed recalcitrant, yet deluged in doctrinal change in the early 1960s.

With regard to security, the second leg of the trinity, the end state in Vietnam was still the same as conventional doctrine: orienting on the friendly unit, and preventing observation or harm to friendly units or installations. However, in doctrine, the means to the end are as important as the end. In Vietnam, the end was the same the means were different. In a trinity security mission, security is usually provided by the cavalry as a unit, usually to its host unit. By that example, part of the cavalry's (both division and armored cavalry regiment) mission is to conduct security missions to protect the division or unit assigned. The conventional security missions for this are primarily in the forms of screen, guard, and cover missions. Each provides a different level of protection, or security, for the rest of the friendly unit. They can be stationary, or moving, and can be to the front, flanks, or rear. By adding these qualifiers, one can see the problems posed by area warfare: there are not front lines per se, no true orientation. In the area warfare, the dense terrain and "everywhere" nature of the enemy caused security to be everywhere: in convoys, along convoy routes, around installations. When units conducted missions, they *were* their own security in many cases, both in stationary night defensive positions in the field, and on the move, largely because they oriented on themselves rather than another friendly body. The one exception to this was the air cavalry, which provided a level of observation and early warning that a ground cavalry unit could conduct in a conventional, European environment, where fields of observation and fires were better, and the enemy came from a known direction. In Vietnam, security

³¹¹ General Don A. Starry. "To Change An Army," *Military Review*, (March 1983), Vo. LXIII, Number 3, 26. Article adapted from an address made by General Starry in 1982 to the U.S. Army War College.

became less of a doctrinal concept or mission, and became, for the most part, literal security.

One of the other aspects about security repeatedly found in the doctrinal manuals of the era was that security and reconnaissance were interrelated and augmented each other. This was equally true in Vietnam. A “search and destroy” mission kept the enemy off guard and harassed him, increasing the likelihood that planning an attack on U.S. forces was harder and more complicated. Finding enemy supply caches or installations also harassed the enemy. By destroying the enemies support structure and “logistics nose,” it made harder for him and less likely that he’d attack. Indeed, largely as a result of General Abrams’ change in strategy, it was stated that in area operations, reconnaissance took on a security function. Additionally, when conducting security missions such as convoy escort, armored cavalry was always on the lookout for the enemy; thus it was always a form of reconnaissance. Further, it is arguable that in a country such as Vietnam, with the blurring of roles between maneuver and cavalry units, the homogenization, with each unit providing largely serving as its own maneuver unit and cavalry unit, the trinity missions were themselves more blurred and homogenized.

Economy of force was perhaps least discussed. In a straight conventional sense, the principle of economy of force rests on the idea as previously discussed: that cavalry, with the smallest force possible, engages the enemy in offensive or defensive actions that enable the decisive maneuver of the main body of friendly forces. Vietnam required major adjustments to this trinity, doctrinal definition. The first is that seldom did a decisive point materialize. The decisive point became where the enemy was found, and at the point, the mission was his destruction. Second, seldom did the cavalry have the

luxury of acting as, well, the cavalry. There was seldom a main body of forces behind the cavalry, whose decisive maneuver was enabled by the cavalry. The closest thing to this was those instances of working in conjunction with airmobile infantry. In those cases, the cavalry would usually find and fix the enemy, and the airmobile infantry would maneuver to seal or block in the enemy, and prevent their escape, and complete the destruction of the enemy. In this situation, as was pointed out earlier, there was a role reversal in doctrine, with armor cavalry becoming the fixing force, and infantry becoming the maneuver force. In still other instances, the main body of forces was technology – the artillery and air strikes that were called in on the enemy to complete their destruction, after the enemy was found and fixed by either the cavalry or maneuver forces. Both served as a fixing force. Everything was predicated on finding the enemy.³¹²

Lastly, regarding economy of force, it can be argued that a twist on this concept was that, with not many cavalry and mechanized units in Vietnam let alone total forces in proportion to the job at hand, units were deployed across the country with economy of force in mind. As reflected in the 1967 stability operations manual, economy of force in Vietnam came to mean, in one sense, that units that had an area of responsibility, enabling other forces to conduct strike operations as opportunities arose. In area operations, units were spread over as much terrain as possible, and when the enemy was found, appropriate friendly forces were massed on him. *The decisive point became a decisive point, or decisive points.*

Other methods of achieving the Vietnam version of economy of force – that is, getting the most area coverage possible, came from new techniques such as saturation patrolling. Saturation patrolling was one of the techniques mentioned more often later in

³¹² Which is probably why “search and destroy” seemed to take on such mythic proportions.

the war, and was likely another reflection of General Abrams's emphasis on smaller-unit operations. According to the 1967 stability operations manual, saturation patrolling entailed "deployment of patrols over a selected area of operations so that insurgents cannot move without detection."³¹³ Patrolling was conducted by squad and platoon-sized forces which maintained contact with insurgent forces until larger units could be deployed to destroy them."³¹⁴ Under offensive operations, the manual says that "harassment tactics also may be conducted as an economy of force measure," and under defensive operations, the manual said to "economize forces in one area in order to apply decisive force elsewhere."³¹⁵ This was the new, Vietnam-version of economy of force.

At the same time, in area operations, finding and destroying was not the only goal. General Abrams realized that the war of the people was as important as destruction of the enemy. Therefore, this part of the war took on added emphasis. It meant that the civil side of the war could be seen almost as a new form of decisive maneuver. Under this increased emphasis on the civil side of an area war, economy of force meant that forces were spread around as much as was feasible, providing maximum coverage that allowed massing elsewhere. This improved the security of the people by increased presence and familiarity with terrain in a particular area. Presence also was deterrence, show of force, and harassment. The very presence of units protected the citizens and impeded guerilla activity. Further, continued presence meant not leaving after a big operation, allowing guerrillas to return or rebuild. This aspect of the war in Vietnam,

³¹³ Saturation patrolling is another example of using intent, like "search and destroy." There is no one diagram that shows how to best conduct it (there are written descriptions in reports), but it is understood that saturation patrolling is saturating an area with small patrols that at some point, are everywhere. Even with saturation patrolling, the end state was still the same, however.

³¹⁴ FM 31-23 Stability Operations 1967, 89.

³¹⁵ FM 31-23, 1967, 90.

given increased focus under General Abrams, when added to the success of tactical operations, led author and historian Lewis Sorley to make the assertion that the war was actually won in late 1970.³¹⁶

Part of the reason the metamorphosis between the trinity missions of the cavalry and their execution in Vietnam happened was because it *could*. In that sense, the cavalry were victims of their own success, akin to the super achiever who finds only more tasks piled on the plate. There were several major reasons why it was convenient for the cavalry to become a “jack of all trades.” One was that the cavalry possessed many positive characteristics that quickly enabled them to accomplish a myriad of tasks, such as firepower, mobility, protection, flexibility, and inherent task organization. They quickly shifted from a force whose role was not envisioned in an insurgent environment (unlike the helicopter) to one that was used almost everywhere, for almost everything. Another reason that the cavalry *could* adapt from their trinity missions was that very rarely did enemy forces represent a lethal threat to U.S. and allied forces, and seldom were they massed. Therefore, U.S. forces did not, and could not keep out or away enemy forces, or find them in the sense of large, lethal formations, because there were virtually none (until after U.S. forces left). On the other hand, the dispersed, covert nature of the guerillas and the terrain that hid them precluded trinity missions in the traditional sense. Therefore, it was almost as if the enemy was too small to be relevant to conventional, trinity mission doctrinal template, while at the other end of the spectrum, the relative lack of massed formations further rendered the doctrinal template largely impractical. Therefore, it was both okay and necessary to adjust, and the cavalry *could*.

³¹⁶ Sorley, *A Better War*, 217.

The ground cavalry's trinity roles were still important; indeed, intelligence in Vietnam was crucial. With cavalry becoming largely maneuver units, and vice versa, both blending their responsibilities (doctrinal homogenization), the "old" responsibilities of the trinity did not go away per se; rather, they were largely picked up by other assets, other new concepts and formations that *could*, especially the air cavalry. The fact that the trinity missions were taken up by other newer organizations and certain technologies largely covered for the ground cavalry while they were out performing their adapted missions. The newer organizations and technologies were enablers that eased the loss of the ground cavalry performing in their trinity roles, and aided and abetted the de facto transition of doctrinal responsibility, and masked the change. An example of this was Task Force Spur, with air cavalry providing far reconnaissance of the objective and land navigation, or in statements in after action reports to the effect that "the aero scout section has proven to be the most effective means of locating the Viet Cong."³¹⁷ Additionally, infantry and other maneuver units picked up trinity roles, such as flank and rear security, just as the cavalry picked up maneuver roles – all part of the mission homogenization.³¹⁸

Beyond the air cavalry and other conventional maneuver units, there were other means of filling the trinity gap. During the later years of the war, cavalry units, among others, used techniques such as automatic ambushes, which were ambushes that were powered by batteries tied to claymore mines, rigged to go off with no friendly forces present.³¹⁹ There was a new doctrinal emphasis on surveillance, the passive dimension of reconnaissance. Intelligence and reconnaissance gathering assets were created during

³¹⁷ "Annual Historical Summary, E Troop, 17th Cavalry (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate), September 1966. S7D3, #17, II B 1-6.

³¹⁸ 1-4 Cavalry SOP, 1966, S2D3B1, #69, 11. The examples here are of infantry battalions providing flank and rear security for brigade sized operations.

³¹⁹ Automatic Ambush Memo, 3/11 ACR, S2D3B1, #65, 7 November 1970.

the Vietnam with positive results, such as the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRPs), Long Range Reconnaissance Companies (as a Corps level asset), and a number of programs run through the Special Forces such as Mobile Guerilla Forces and Mobile Strike Forces, Project Omega, and other operations with their Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) counterparts. The Special Forces operations in particular were primarily dismounted reconnaissance, but they conducted screening and surveillance missions, and as necessary conducted limited attack and defense missions. At first, their missions were primarily to “provide a reconnaissance and intelligence screen” along the Cambodian border, as well as area development, but after 1965, their missions shifted to finding the enemy for the conventional forces.³²⁰

Other additional reconnaissance assets included the use of reconnaissance airplane companies, and even scout tracking dogs.³²¹ Another aspect of the war was the increased emphasis on and critical importance of human intelligence on enemy activities and whereabouts, and penetration of his political activities. The Phoenix Program was an example of this. Lastly, increasing reliance on technology, such as seismic sensors, infrared and image intensification night vision devices, radar, photography, and even devices known as “people sniffers” were used to shore up trinity missions.

³²⁰ Outline History of the 5th SF Gp (Abn), “Participation in the CIDG Program, 1961-1970,” U.S. Army Military History Institute, 2-3. The history also refers to the period of 1965 to 1969 as “Support of American Conventional Unit Deployment.” It states that SF and CIDG forces were used in a “variety of services, including local reconnaissance, flank security, intelligence reports, bomb damage assessments, guides, and interpreters.” Further, it was estimated that by 1967 U.S. Army Special Forces (units) were producing over 40% of all MACV ground combat intelligence. (p. 15-17.) Apparently, the border surveillance role was filled by the SF and the CIDG, until 1970, when the CIDG were discontinued, partly because it was determined that at that point in the war, the job of border surveillance could be turned over to the ARVN because of their increased level of competence. It may have had to do too with the levels of success elsewhere in the country, i.e. post-Tet and under new strategy under General Abrams.

³²¹ Operational Report Lessons Learned, (ORLL) II CTZ, HQ, Field Force Vietnam, S7D3 #7, Aug-Oct 67, 2-3.

CHAPTER V

THE POST-VIETNAM LEGACY

Historian and Professor George Herring stated that “in the immediate aftermath of the war, the nation experienced a self-conscious, collective amnesia.”³²² The military was a large part of this experience. In a sense, the amnesia was a result of self-administered anesthesia, an effort to numb the pain of shock, disappointment, betrayal, and confusion, as a result of the Vietnam War. These emotions created a vulnerable environment for an institution such as the Army that did not have the luxury of asking too many questions when so many were asking for answers from them. As in other times history, change often takes place during times upheaval and great turmoil. The U.S. Army in post-war Vietnam was in such a state, and was no exception.

By the end of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973, the U.S. Army was in need of repair and change. Its reputation seemingly needed refurbishing in the wake of the perception that the military lost the war. It was in need of repair in terms of a loss of identity; the sense of having lost America’s first war was no doubt a mind-numbing sensation, and the scorn which much of America heaped on it upon its return no doubt affected its sense of identity. The army questioned itself and a country that saw it fight a war in a far away land that few seemed to cared about.

³²² Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 273.

To add a sense of urgency, everything from Vietnam seemed wrong. The U.S. theoretically lost the war. Morale was down. Discipline was down. Recruiting for the new volunteer Army was down. One school of thought found fault with success; the air cavalry and airmobile infantry that had done so well there did so because of the enemy's lack of air defense options. The same was undoubtedly true with opinions about armor and cavalry; that they did well largely because the enemy did not have the volume of anti-tank weaponry to stop them, and so on. In that climate, it was not hard to heap other factors on top to continue to push the Army toward forgetfulness of the lessons of Vietnam. The outcome of the war seemed to confirm pre-Vietnam war biases about the use of armor and cavalry in an unconventional war; those who saw the war as an aberration or a temporary blip on the radar, or those that thought a war such as Vietnam belonged to the netherworld of infantry and Special Forces. Now, it appeared that the Army needed to unlearn the way of fighting in Vietnam and quit cold turkey, because what was learned there was now hazardous to national security health. In the opinion of one historian, "in short, a decade of war in Vietnam had rendered the U.S. Army an unlikely instrument with which to protect America's European interests."³²³

One the areas that needed repair was doctrine. The need to overhaul doctrine stemmed from the usage of an army that had been structured for a conventional fight before the Vietnam, but whose conventional abilities, habits, and understanding of war experienced a metamorphosis in Vietnam. While the metamorphosis was good in the sense that Army units, cavalry included, showed amazing verve, versatility, and flexibility in their ability to adapt conventional missions in Vietnam, and other units

³²³ Major Paul Herbert, "Deciding What Has to be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100-5, Operations." (Ft. Leavenworth, KS : Leavenworth Papers, #16, 1988), 13.

proved their concepts worthy such as the airmobile infantry and air cavalry, it was bad in that the Army was seen as no longer prepared to fight the truly critical wars. Now there was a sense of urgency to revamp, because, as seen from the eyes of the generals, the U.S. had lost time during the Vietnam War doctrinally, and now had to catch up.³²⁴

The idea to overhaul doctrine also came from a revamp in strategy. As part of a major reassessment of U.S. strategic policy in the wake of the war, the U.S. decided that it needed to reduce its potential commitment to third world nations and the amount of wars it could realistically fight simultaneously. Consequently, the Army adopted a “1 ½ war” (at any given time) as opposed to the “2 1/2 war” policy of the 1960’s.³²⁵ The plans called for a shift back from Asia to a cold war stance in Europe with NATO, as part of a strategy entitled “strategy of realistic deterrence.” The model scenario said that the Army needed to be prepared to fight in Europe (the “1”), at the same time theoretically as a conflict in the Middle East (the “1/2”). With a resurgent Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, many felt that the tattered Army that emerged from the jungles of Vietnam was in no condition to confront this threat. This was the major factor in reforming and repairing the Army after Vietnam.

If the major impetus for doctrinal overhaul did not come from one man, it was certainly led by one man. The need for revamping doctrine was led by General William DePuy, formerly the commander of the 1st ID in Vietnam, 1-4 Cavalry’s division. His perspective as commander of newly formed Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) was that the Army had learned bad habits in Vietnam, and that now they needed to unlearn them, shake off the dust of Vietnam, and get collective heads back in

³²⁴ Doughty, “The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine,” 63.

³²⁵ Herbert, “Deciding What Has to be Done,” 13.

the game. One of his major contributions in the post-Vietnam era was the creation of the new 1976 version of FM 100-5 Operations, the first since 1968. The new manual set the tone and direction for the rest of the Army.

Most importantly, with the new FM 100-5 he wanted to make a deliberate break from the past in order to set doctrine up to prepare for the next war, not fight the last one. He felt that soldiers and officers had learned bad habits in Vietnam that would get them killed in the conventional fight.³²⁶ Therefore, his was a conscious effort to break from the past in order to “wipe the slate clean.” Doing so brought no cries of protest, as methods and doctrinal execution in Vietnam were atypical in most respects, certainly with respect to the cavalry. Certainly, he can’t be faulted for wanting to prepare for the strategic worst case scenario, which took the Army back to a familiar place: Europe.

Some of the overarching characteristics of the new manual were that it emphasized the importance of winning the first battle in a potential clash in Europe. Some of this was a result of watching the results of the Arab-Israeli war in 1973. Further, the tank returned to prominence, becoming the “decisive weapon” of ground combat, but the manual also emphasized the importance of the combined arms team. Overall, the manual’s tone was that of armored, mobile warfare, with a threat model based on Warsaw Pact forces. The manual was clearly geared toward a conventional war in Europe. It introduced the idea of the “active defense,” and introduced the term “Air-Land Battle.”³²⁷

There were other factors that helped foster a sense of urgency toward creating this manual. According to Major Paul Herring in his work on General DePuy and his creation of the new FM 100-5, one of the additional and very important reasons for doctrine is that

³²⁶ Herbert, “Deciding What Has to be Done,” 28.

³²⁷ Herbert, “Deciding What Has to be Done,” 17.

it supports the credibility of the U.S. government, and by so doing helps achieve foreign policy objectives simply by its existence. It sends a clear position to potential enemies and thus it enhances credibility when it comes to containment, deterrence, and conflict control.³²⁸ It was very likely that General DePuy saw this and believed this. The Army, stumbling out of Vietnam could ill afford to have doctrinal confusion or send messages of weakness to allies or potential adversaries. Further, one of doctrine's roles is to connect tactics all the way up to national strategy. In light of this, it was possible that because doctrine was so much based on conventional conflict, a seeming "misapplication" of it in Vietnam caused a chain reaction of "misfits" all the way up the doctrinal ladder, or vice versa. Perhaps the biggest gap in doctrine was in not addressing prior to the war the special aspects of counterinsurgency in doctrine as they pertained to the adaptation of conventional forces, and in not beefing up the tactical aspects and explanations of fighting the counterinsurgency – being more specific.

There was also the civilian side of counterinsurgency / stability operations. General Abrams especially recognized and emphasized this part of the war. By combating the insurgency without addressing General Abrams' "one war" from the beginning, the U.S. arguably played into the hands of the North Vietnamese, who sought to tie down and wear out U.S. forces with guerillas acting in an economy-of-force role. The waiting game was lost, as the American people lost patience with the war and consequently the political will to continue was lost. Additionally, though the U.S. forces were winning tactically – the inability of the U.S. to articulate the appropriate strategic goals handicapped the tactical efforts from the outset. This lack of ability to articulate the appropriate strategy lies at the feet of the Commanders-in-Chief, the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

³²⁸ Herbert, "Deciding What Has to be Done," 12.

and the highest leaders on the ground in Vietnam.³²⁹ In the words of Col. Harry Summers in his work *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, “tactical success is not necessarily strategic success, and tactical failure is not necessarily strategic failure.”³³⁰ In any event, perhaps part of the reasoning behind the new doctrine after the war was to better align tactics with national security policy and strategy objectives.

While the new FM 100-5 set the tone for the Army and determined the direction it would take, the cavalry, in the post-Vietnam era did not experience much doctrinal change. The impact of the metamorphosis on armored cavalry while in Vietnam did not have much effect beyond Vietnam. During the war, they transitioned from their doctrinal role as a force specially trained and equipped to perform their trinity missions to a “jack of all trades” function. At the end of the Vietnam war, the doctrinal framework was set for their return to the trinity, a quick whisking back to the reality of their job as “masters of some.” It probably took little incentive for armored cavalry to want to get back to their trinity missions.

Before rushing back to the trinity, however, questions might have been asked. During Vietnam they adapted their trinity missions, and fought within self-imposed restraints, in unfriendly terrain, against a wily and tenacious enemy. They did what they had to do, and became a “jack of all trades” largely because they could. One might pose the questions about their ability to do so much, and do it well. Under more scrutiny, one might ask why there were not more units like the cavalry, units with so many positive qualities, such as organic task organization down to the platoon level, as well as firepower, mobility, protection, and top-notch communications. It may have been that

³²⁹ Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1982), 57.

³³⁰ Summer, *On Strategy*, 57.

these attributes were given a cold-water bath of reality by a trend that found fault with success. In the case of the cavalry, a critique of their relative success may have been the fact that they faced a relatively lightly armed adversary, faced no enemy armored vehicles or air power. In short, the cavalry did well because they overmatched the enemy.³³¹ As it was, one of the biggest “problems” with the cavalry was posed by General Starry at the end of his work *Mounted Combat In Vietnam*. In it, he ponders the question of piecemealing armor, whether it was done accidentally, ignoring the lessons of history, or by necessity. On the other side, the necessity of the cavalry might have been questioned. Did the Army even need units trained for trinity missions, such as the cavalry? After all, during Vietnam, cavalry performed maneuver unit missions, and by default maneuver units performed their own versions of trinity missions. In this context, what was the difference, or why have a difference? These were two questions to ponder: why not make more units more like cavalry, but at the same time, the question might be asked, do we really need cavalry?

In spite of these possible questions, it seemed that the main impact for the cavalry that served in Vietnam was relearning the conventional tasks, and in a sense forgetting what they learned in Vietnam, not only because they had to, but because the culture of the time encouraged them to do so. Caught up in need to redirect doctrine from the top, lessons learned and doctrinal adaptations, with a few exceptions, were put on the shelves, perhaps one of the drawbacks of driving doctrine from the top without thorough canvassing from the bottom. Ironically, the two studies conducted during the war, the MACOV study and the ACTIV study involved fairly thorough bottom-up analysis. In

³³¹ This is similar to comments and observations about the air cavalry and the airmobile infantry: they did well because of the low to non-existent air defense threat of the enemy.

any event, the cavalry resumed planning for and training for newly energized cold war, conventional, European setting trinity missions. The transition may have been fairly easy.

Cavalry doctrine in the post-war period did not change much, since now they were doing what they were supposed to be doing all along: pure and unadulterated trinity missions in a conventional war setting. The new cavalry manuals of 1977 and 1981 reflected this. One change of note was the one of the previous fundamentals of reconnaissance had changed. “Avoid decisive engagements” was gone, and in its place was “retain freedom of maneuver.”³³² Thus, it is arguable that the “fighting cavalry” legacy had an effect on the doctrine of cavalry at the end of the Vietnam era. However, the biggest overall change was that all references to counterinsurgency, stability operations, or any of the terms from Vietnam such as “search and destroy” were gone. Even reconnaissance in force was gone. Additionally, the threat model was exclusively based on the Cold War threat in Europe.³³³ Regarding this whitewashing of the doctrine, at least one perspective was that at least now doctrine was making a conscious effort to prepare cavalry for the next war, whereas in Vietnam execution led much of what occurred and doctrine followed. Perhaps a conclusion was reached that it was easier to train the cavalry and the army in general for conventional missions and then have them adapt to counterinsurgent-type warfare, rather than the other way around.

Regarding the fate of stability operations, after the October, 1972 manual, the next came out in November, 1974, right on the heels of the departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam. For the 1974 manual, the name had changed back to Internal Defense and

³³² FM 17-95, Cavalry, July 1977, 5-2; FM 17-36, 1968, 1-5.

³³³ FM 17-95 Cavalry April 1981, 2-1.

Development, terms that were used earlier during the war. The next version came out in 1981, FM 100-20, entitled Low Intensity Conflict. It was almost as though the term “stability operations” brought back the specter of Vietnam, and was therefore banished. Surprisingly, however, the manual did not dump all the terms. Missions were found in a chapter entitled “counterguerrilla operations.”³³⁴ The missions were broken into categories such as “operational techniques,” some of which included search operations, patrols, ambush, counterambush, and encirclement. Another category, “offensive operations” includes movement to contact, and reconnaissance in force, among others. There were even the familiar terms of “strike campaign” and “consolidation campaign.”³³⁵ Though none of the defined operational terms or techniques were described in detail, they were there, and reflections of the Vietnam experience were there.

Curiously enough, in the cyclical nature of warfare in history, the concept of stability operations appeared again in the mid-nineties with the deployments of U.S. soldiers to Bosnia, only then the terms transferred from high-intensity / low-intensity conflict (HIC and LIC) to Operations Other Than War, and Military Operations Other Than War (OOTW and MOOTW). Not long after that, stability operations came back as a term, and in today’s conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is referred to doctrinally as Stability Operations / Support Operations (SOSO).

Conclusion

In the end, cavalry doctrine based on the trinity missions changed, but changed after the fact. The trinity missions changed in name, and intent, and even meaning, but most the doctrine added was at best cursory. Ground cavalry execution changed in front

³³⁴ FM 100-20 Low Intensity Conflict 1981, 6.

³³⁵ FM 100-20, 1981, 7-9.

of the doctrinal curve out of the necessity to adapt to area warfare and the area operations that had to be adapted to it. Evidence of this change was found particularly in new mission terms, such as “search and destroy.” What made broader terms such as “search and destroy” work, and what perhaps may excuse the fact that it and others like it such as “search and clear” were barely mentioned in doctrine is that the terms conveyed overarching *intent*. Given the lack of detail in newly released doctrine during this period, this reliance on intent *may* have been planned. Furthermore, new and broader terms such as “search and destroy” rested on other doctrinal missions, which gave the broader terms doctrinal credibility. For example, “search and destroy” rested on multiple doctrinal tasks, such as a movement to contact or reconnaissance in force.

The pre-war cavalry doctrine’s focus on the conventional trinity missions neatly fit into predictions of a minimal role for armor and cavalry in an environment such as Vietnam. As a result, cavalry troopers were largely unprepared for the environment in which they found themselves. Indicators show that mounted vehicles were not seriously considered for use in a counterinsurgent role, as evidenced by the accidental deployment of armor to Vietnam. They adapted, mostly because they had to, but also because they could. They adapted the doctrine and skills that they had. In the process, the trinity missions changed in execution, with cavalry’s missions becoming more like maneuver units in a form of de facto mission homogenization. Consequently, ground cavalry became a “jack of all trades.” All of this was aided by the introduction of other forms of intelligence gathering to help fill the trinity gaps. These forms utilized emerging technologies mounted on aircraft and on the ground, such as night vision devices, radar,

and seismic devices. These technological advances helped increase and emphasize surveillance, which helped particularly with reconnaissance, but also with security.

These hard learned lessons were largely set aside at the end of the war as the Army set about expunging the habits of Vietnam from its collective memory, partly because the memories were painful, but also seen as harmful to survival on the future battlefield. Also expunged were the discussions of the metamorphosis that occurred between cavalry doctrine and cavalry execution in a counterinsurgent environment. The bottom line was that what was done “in the ‘Nam’” would get you killed in another environment, the most important one, conventional war in Europe, where winning the first battle was critical. Most of what was done in Vietnam was relegated to lesser manuals.

In the final analysis, doctrinal terms are important – the words have meaning. Doctrine is important, because it connects tactics all the way to national policy and strategy. While doctrine is subject to intelligent interpretation on the ground, it *does* have limits. Vietnam is a good example of stretching doctrine to its limits in terms of execution, but at the cost of under preparing soldiers for the environment they would be facing. In short, execution led doctrine. While this situation is certainly always possible because of the uncertain nature of war, it is not optimal. While doctrine will never foresee everything, it should do its best, and to do this, it should not let the lessons of Vietnam slip away.

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