

Hamlet Security: A Lesson from the Corps Commander
by Parker W. Borg

After studying Vietnamese at FSI, Parker Borg served with the CORDS program in Vietnam from mid-1968 to mid-1970 — the first 18 months in Tuy Phuoc District of Binh Dinh Province and the last six months at the Plans, Programs and Policy Office of MACCORDS in Saigon — and later returned at the time of the ceasefire in 1973 as a political observer. He served with the State Department for 35 years, including tours as ambassador in Mali and Iceland.

Darkness would arrive within the hour. And here we were, boarding a helicopter to fly to an obscure hamlet far from the main road, a place that we would avoid in the best of circumstances except in the middle of the day. My boss, the district senior adviser, and I were being crammed into the already overloaded helicopter belonging to the top Vietnamese general from II Corps Headquarters in Nhatrang. It was crazy, but in a sense it was my own fault.

It was March 1969. I was in the middle of my 18-month tour as a deputy district adviser in Tuy Phuoc district, a short distance out of Quinhon in Binh Dinh Province of central Vietnam.

We had heard two days earlier that General Charles Corcoran, the new senior U.S. military adviser to the Corps Commander would be flying into the district. This would be his first visit. We had no idea why he was coming. On the day before the visit, we learned instead that General Lu Lan himself, the II Corps Commander, would be showing up. We were relieved. This would now be a Vietnamese show. The general was scheduled to arrive at 2 p.m. Ceremonial units began their preparations at 7:30 a.m. in case he arrived early (I'd never heard of a Vietnamese general arriving early, but then...). The staff in some of the local offices put in all-nighters, making charts, graphs, maps, etc. If our advisory effort had contributed nothing else, we had taught the Vietnamese how to make better flow charts and maps. Of course, the general didn't arrive on time.

At about 3:30 in the afternoon two choppers appeared on the horizon, carrying General Lu Lan, one or two other senior Vietnamese generals, General Corcoran, Colonel Tho (the Binh Dinh province chief), Ben Wood (the province senior adviser) and assorted straphangers. We sat in the background as the show began. Toward what we thought was the end of the briefing the province chief pulled open a spread sheet with a list of hamlet ratings and asked Mr. Wood why three hamlets of Tuy Phuoc had regressed to contested status according to American reports.

Mr. Wood immediately tossed me the question. I responded from the back of the room that we had lost out in these areas because the security units had been withdrawn and transferred to another district. There were no replacements. I refrained from adding that this had happened because of orders from the province chief, as implemented by the district chief. "Nonsense," said the province chief. "That area is still secure, isn't it?" he

barked at the district chief. “Of course,” replied the district chief. There was a flurry of activity up front that we couldn’t follow, and the discussion continued.

At about 5 p.m. it seemed that the briefing was over. Suddenly the Corps Commander announced, to our horror, that we would take a visit to this area that the Vietnamese maintained was pacified, but which the Americans had said was contested with the Viet Cong in dominant control. We diplomatically suggested that it was very late in the afternoon to be visiting any rural area with a delegation of this size. It had now become a matter of honor. The province chief had to establish that he had not acted incorrectly in taking a unit from Tuy Phuoc and the district chief had to prove that he had selected a relatively unimportant unit to leave the district.

I knew I might be in trouble. I was the one who filled out the monthly reports, known as the HES (Hamlet Evaluation System) reports, which rated the security status of every hamlet in the district. These reports were a pain to complete: more than a dozen questions about hostilities, the presence of military forces, Viet Cong activities, economic indicators, status of health and education programs, etc. Each month we were required to give ratings from “A” to “F” for each of these criteria for all 124 hamlets in Tuy Phuoc. Who could know all of this information with precision about any of these communities?

These reports were submitted to the U.S. advisers at the province level, who shared them with their counterparts and forwarded them up the food chain to an office at Pentagon East in Saigon, where they were consolidated and summarized to demonstrate for military and civilian leaders in Saigon and Washington how the war was going.

The responsibility for completing these reports for the district had fallen to me largely by default. None of my bosses wanted to be bothered with the task. None of my subordinates had the breadth of knowledge to complete them. While I recognized the shortcomings of the system locally and the likely even greater shortcomings of consolidating such reports at the national level, I found them a useful way for me to keep track of the changing local scene. Before making my submissions, I recorded each change on my own less elaborate spread sheets. Tracking what was happening and preparing the report was time consuming, but there was little else to do for diversion after the sundown curfew each day. I was reasonably conscientious, but I knew my reports were approximations and heard that in many districts the whole HES program was a joke. There were too many questions about too many unknown parcels of geography. Giving a letter grade to a hamlet without a narrative rarely showed anything of significance to an outsider.

Additionally the U.S. army majors who held the top positions at most districts generally wanted to show progress during their six-month tours. This meant insisting on downgrading the ratings when they arrived and inflating them at the end of their tours. I was fortunate that three majors with whom I worked left me alone. I did my job and submitted the reports each month. There was pressure for progress at the province level,

but I didn't particularly care. I was already at the end of the world. What could anybody do?

As the two helicopters lifted off in the last glow of sunlight and glided about 100 feet above the sea of rice paddies and islands of settlement for the 15 minute ride, we believed we had convinced the generals that a flyover of the area would be sufficient, but as we approached we saw a smoke flare. We were going to land! We saw a few troops on the ground, as well as a scattering of people. Once we were on the ground, the Vietnamese bounded from the choppers and began wandering around within the relatively small secured perimeter, quickly proclaiming that the area must be pacified because it was peaceful and everybody was friendly.

I also walked around and talked with some of the soldiers and the bystanders. I heard first, that we had landed in the hamlet next to the one where everybody thought we were, but this didn't matter since both were equally insecure; second, that the security unit had received a radio message about 45 minutes earlier telling them to move into this area from a hamlet further away and secure it for the general's visit; and third, that the people standing around didn't live there, but had been stopped by the soldiers while passing through on their way home to other hamlets where they slept at night.

As the helicopters lifted off into the night air, we could see a goodly number of other uniforms on the ground. These people had come out of the bushes where they had been providing an outer rim of special security. We later learned that another military unit was providing a similar extra layer of special security at a location about a half mile away.

When we returned, the province chief turned to me within earshot of his boss and said that he would have to accompany me to make my hamlet evaluations in the future. It was an occasion when a million retorts came to mind, but all I could do was thank him for including us on the excursion. All the Americans seemed aware of the situation, and I think that the province chief knew this had been a staged event, but that he couldn't admit the problem and retain face. If General Lu Lan departed with the sense that this had been a successful visit, that was all that mattered to him, his advisers and his subordinates.

In the next HES report I did not change any of the ratings for the hamlets in the area of our visit. Nobody seemed to care. I never heard again from any of the Vietnamese or American officials about my ratings.