Phu My
by Jim Landberg

James Landberg served as a CORDS district senior adviser, Phu My District, Binh Dinh Province, Northern II Corps from 1968 to1969.

In the spring of 1968, I was assigned to lead an all-military advisory team in Phu My District, northern Binh Dinh Provice.[1] The U.S./South Vietnamese[2] counterinsurgency strategy (aka Pacification) there was failing. Half the district was controlled by the Viet Cong (VC) and the Third North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Division. The latter engaged in major battles with a U.S. infantry battalion based in the district, with heavy casualties on both sides. Another large part of the district was occupied by friendly forces in daytime, but was unsafe from enemy incursions at night. Much of the population unsympathetic to the VC/NVA had fled to refugee camps to the south.

Under the prevailing "Concentric Ring" pacification strategy, the ARVN regiment was supposed to establish an outer security cordon around friendly populated areas. Within the populated areas, security was maintained by lightly armed Vietnamese militia—regional forces (RF), popular forces (PF) and local cadre, commanded by my counter-part, the district chief, a capable ARVN major.

The strategy did not work for several reasons. Underpaid ARVN troops were unfamiliar with the local population and on their daily patrols through the villages would often steal food or commit other abuses that created local hostility. ARVN units also were discouraged from taking casualties in battle and were not held responsible for failing to deter enemy troops from nighttime attacks, leaving the brunt of the fight to the militia. Command responsibility was fractured among the ARVN regimental commander, the district chief and the U.S. commander. The U.S. tried to operate Korean War-style, with tanks and armored personnel carriers, artillery and helicopters in a land of rice paddies and jungle. The NVA only came out of hiding to fight the United States when it had the advantage of surprise and terrain.

With approval from Saigon, we agreed to unify the command and operating structure in the district. Phu My is bisected by a chain of low, unpopulated hills that made it easy to set up two zones, north and south. The ARVN regiment's base was in the southern half and a new commander had taken charge. The U.S. combat battalion also had a new commander, who agreed to co-locate his command post with the district's headquarters.

Under the plan, the ARVN regimental commander took charge of all security in the southern zone, both ARVN regular units and militia. He agreed to station ARVN platoons in villages/hamlets for periods of at least 30 days, allowing them to get to know the population, the terrain, and the enemy. Most importantly, if an ARVN unit on the

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[1] A Province is equivalent to a U.S. state, a district to a county, a village akin to a township, and hamlets small farming communities.
[2] Known as GOSVN.

periphery failed to challenge infiltrating enemy units, ARVN troops might have to fight the battle in the villages. It did not take long for ARVN performance to improve dramatically. ARVN also began to actively support civil operations, such as rebuilding schools and roads and resettling refugees.

Identical arrangements were adopted in the northern zone under the district chief, including command of ARVN units, with similar results.

However, the district chief broke the tacit understanding between the NVA and ARVN of not interfering with each other's movements and activities. When an ARVN platoon in the northern zone reported that NVA troops were out harvesting rice, the district chief ordered the platoon to attack. This unprecedented action may have provoked the NVA into a disastrous daylight attack on the district headquarters a few days later. U.S. air support was brought in, ARVN counter-attacked, forcing the NVA to flee toward the mountains under artillery and aerial fire. A Korean unit and U.S. forces cut off the NVA escape, surrounding them on a small mountain that was bombed and shelled day and night. The 3rd NVA Division was largely destroyed.

Without NVA support, the remaining VC were vulnerable to a conventional ink-blot-style campaign, usually led by a U.S. unit that would helicopter into a VC dominated area, followed by reestablishment of government control. Under the onslaught, the VC fled into mountain areas, unable to visit their families or obtain food, water and supplies. In mid-1969, a group of over 1,000 VC insurgents surrendered under an amnesty program.

By the time of my departure at the end of November 1969, insurgent activity was largely eliminated. Refugees were returning to their villages, rebuilding houses, farms and infrastructure. A peaceful national election was held.

I wish I could say that was the end of the story, but we know what happened. Under the Nixon/Kissinger administration, Vietnamization—the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces—was well underway as I left. The next year, a reconstituted NVA Third Division came down the Ho Chi Minh trail and overran Phu My District, reversing the gains of 1968-1969.

How would I rate my Vietnamese experience? I certainly saw unconventional warfare up close! I learned a lot about managing an organization under complex and dangerous circumstances—something more and more FSOs are having to do, it appears. The 1975 communist victory and the evolution of our bilateral relationship since then has increased my skepticism of unilateral U.S. military involvement in Vietnam-like conflicts. We seem to do better with smaller nations where the U.S. has substantial international involvement and overwhelming force: the Dominican Republic in 1965, Bosnia, Kuwait. If we must intervene, our military and diplomatic officers will need to tailor strategies and tactics to fit reality on the ground, as we tried to do in Phu My in 1968-1969.

The NVA 3rd Division Attack on the Phu My District Headquarters Compound, 1969

Perhaps stating that the 3rd NVA Division attacked the Phu My District HQ in daylight is not quite the way to put it.

Here's my recollection of what really happened. Fortune smiled on us that day.

First of all, the NVA 3rd Division was weakened due to the casualties it took in battles with U.S. troops (of the 173rd Airborne Brigade). But based on the aftermath, probably the NVA brought up all the troops it could muster to attack the district HQ.

The district headquarters compound was surrounded by a massive minefield, covered by barbed wire, especially to the west toward the mountains, which were about two miles away. Immediately to the west of the minefield was mostly rice paddies, and a railroad berm out about a mile. There was at least one hamlet out there, unluckily for the inhabitants.

The 3rd Division approached during the night and sent "sappers" ahead to try to cut the barbed wire and remove or disable the mines, a dicey business. If they had succeeded, the NVA could have come into the compound. But the dawn came up before the sappers could finish and there sat the NVA, outside the wire.

Then another thing went wrong for them. The ARVN regiment's base was located just a mile to our south. By sheer happenstance, an ARVN group of armored personnel carriers that was being transferred to a new location had stopped overnight at the regiment's base. They were just getting ready to resume their trip when the dawn came up (bridges on Highway One were closed at night and reopened at light) and the NVA Division was discovered.

The APC unit, unhesitatingly, set off across the fields straight at the NVA, which did not have any defensive positions or mines prepared, since they were expecting to get into our compound during the night. NVA troops broke and ran toward the mountains. They got about half way when the first U.S. planes arrived, flying low right over our compound, dropping 500-pound bombs on the fleeing troops. A 500-pound bomb makes a huge hole in the ground!

Unfortunately, many fleeing troops ran into the little hamlet, seeking cover I suppose, and the planes bombed the place. I hope there were not many villagers actually living there. I went out to look the next day and there were bomb holes all over, but surprisingly quite a few houses were still standing.

Finally, one last bit of hard luck for the North Vietnamese. A Korean combat unit was stationed along the border of the district to our south (Phu Cat). They also had APCs that moved north along the edge of the mountains, cutting off the NVA retreat. There is a funny hill there—looks like half a loaf of bread—just before you get to the main

mountain range. The NVA remnants ran up that hill, where they were trapped. Our side bombed and shelled the hill for several days; I could see the fires burning at night. That was the end of the 3rd Division. I don't recall any activity attributed to the NVA during the remainder of my stay in Phu My.

So, the NVA never exactly "attacked" the district compound. Maybe it would be better to say that "the NVA Division was caught out in the open in daylight as they were preparing to attack the district headquarters compound" or some such thing.

Additional note:
Technically, district advisory teams like mine were supposed to be logistically supported by the South Vietnamese Government. But in reality it was the reverse. My team scrounged everything we needed and moreover scrounged for VN militia units things like hand grenades, claymore mines, and medical supplies. I had five mobile advisory teams that lived in the field with the larger militia units (RF), effectively providing their radio communications, helicopter support, and I don't know what all else. Fortunately, the huge U.S. airbase in Phu Cat District was a fabulous source of scrounged and traded supplies!