

# 50 years ago: Army executes rapid buildup in Vietnam

David Vergun, Army News Service

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WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Aug. 3, 2015) -- In early 1965, about 50,000 U.S. troops, mostly advisors, were in South Vietnam. By the end of 1966, that number had grown to 385,000 with the majority being Army and by that time, they were on the offensive, said Frank L. Jones.

Jones, a professor at the U.S. Army War College, authored a pamphlet, [“Buying Time: 1965-1966”](#) just



published by the Army's Center of Military History.

*UH-1 aircraft of the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion carry wounded 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, Soldiers away during the fight for LZ X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam.*

The rapid buildup was not really part of the original strategy, Jones said. The U.S. advisors, including some 1,200 Green Berets, were there to buy time to train up the South Vietnamese, who would then carry the fight to the enemy on their own initiative.

But things weren't going well. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson's administration and military leaders became aware that South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse, Jones said. Insurgents controlled about half of South Vietnam, along with about a third of the population.

Furthermore, South Vietnamese forces were not showing a willingness to fight and many were deserting. There were even concerns that Saigon could fall unless more U.S. troops were sent in to bolster the country. The role was beginning to change from advise and assist to offensive action.

Johnson, who was a senator during the Korean War, remembered how President Harry S. Truman had been castigated by the Republicans for "losing" China. "That stayed in his memory," Jones said. He didn't want Saigon to fall on his watch.

Furthermore, the U.S. saw the world divided into communist and non-communist countries. There were concerns that if South Vietnam fell to the communist North, other countries in Southeast Asia would follow.

Back home, not a lot of attention was being paid to the rapid buildup of U.S. forces, sometimes called the "Americanization" of South Vietnam, Jones said. Johnson's "Great Society" and civil rights legislation, as well as the space program were taking much of the spotlight.

As the buildup continued, U.S. forces were joined by those from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. This was known as the "Many Flags" campaign.

Notably absent, Jones said, were NATO allies. They already had concerns about the Soviets to their east and were apprehensive about the new U.S. focus in Southeast Asia.

## EARLY BATTLES

On Feb. 7, 1965, the Viet Cong attacked the U.S. base at Pleiku in the Central Highlands. This led to Johnson authorizing the use of strategic bombing of the North by the U.S. Air Force, an operation known as Rolling Thunder. A series of small ground battles ensued throughout the countryside as well.

Also that year, the newly-formed 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was deployed to South Vietnam. While the helicopter had seen use in the Korean War for medevac and small troop movement, the strategy of moving larger formations by air really got its start in 1965, Jones said.

The concept of air mobility, or massive movement by helicopter, came about following the Howze Board studies, chaired by Gen. Hamilton H. Howze and overseen by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1962.

Besides airlifting Soldiers, the experiments carried out included using helicopter gunships and using heavier helicopters like the CH-47 to airlift artillery. The UH-1 Huey, a light helicopter, was relied upon to do much of the troop carrying and also serve as gunships. This was a major doctrinal change for the Army, Jones said.

In November 1965, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, participated in the Ia Drang Valley Campaign, the most well-known battle at the time. The Soldiers were ferried into position using helicopters.

A reason there were fewer pitched battles than in previous wars is because the enemy, especially the insurgents, knew the terrain well and were elusive, Jones said. North Vietnamese Army troops would come in through Laos and Cambodia via the Ho Chi Minh Trail network and fan out below the jungle canopy, hiding weapons in caches. A lot of the work done by Soldiers at this time was locating and destroying these caches.

The Army never officially entered Laos and Cambodia during this period, Jones said. This was a time of limited or restrained warfare. The Johnson administration didn't want to pull the Chinese and Soviets directly into the fighting and risk escalation into a larger conflict with the potential for nuclear weapons being used.

By 1966, Johnson became concerned that counterinsurgency, called "pacification," was getting short-shrift compared with applications of conventional force, Jones said. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV, began to pay more attention to "pacification" efforts. MACV controlled all U.S. ground forces in Vietnam.

Pacification or nation-building involved strengthening local government, rebuilding and goodwill efforts with the local populace so they'd support the efforts of South Vietnam. Today, as was the case then, these activities would be part of an interagency effort, Jones said.

One of the most underreported events of 1965 to 1966 was the massive logistical effort by the U.S. Army, Jones said. Sustaining such a large force, thousands of miles from home, was a huge undertaking.

Further, a massive engineering effort was needed to build port facilities and climate-controlled structures at

various bases, he said. The U.S. Corps of Engineers was a large part of that undertaking.

The Soldiers doing the fighting and supporting the logistical effort were a mixture of enlistees and conscripts, Jones said.

Unlike the Korean War, the Army Reserve was not called up in 1965 and 1966. Johnson was concerned that should he do so, he'd lose backing for the war at home, as the military would seem to be losing control.

By 1965 and 1966, the protest movement had started, but it was still nowhere near in size to the protests that would erupt later in the war.

A number of company- and field-grade officers who served in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 would later lead the Army in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Maj. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. was one such officer who served in Pleiku and other areas advising and assisting the South Vietnamese, earning two Silver Star Medals in the process.

In 1991, by then, a general, he led coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War. Schwarzkopf advocated defeating the enemy quickly and with overwhelming force, which his troops did, liberating Kuwait in a matter of days. It was unlike his experience in Vietnam, Jones said.

For a look at earlier involvement in Vietnam, see Richard Stewart's pamphlet: "The Deepening Involvement: 1945-1965" on the CMH website. A future pamphlet on the later years of the Vietnam War is planned.