

The ARVN Experience

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A full understanding of the Vietnam War must come to grips with the war-time role played by Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, often referred to by the more restrictive name of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). While most of the first generation of histories of the war either chose to write off the ARVN and the state it served as bumbling and doomed to failure, recent historiography has taken a longer and more international view of Vietnam's civil war. New scholarship, focusing on topics as wide-ranging as the nature of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, to studies of allied efforts at counterinsurgency, to the military role played by Vietnamese women, has transformed our understanding of the Vietnam War and has placed the Vietnamese squarely into the center of that understanding. Within that broader framework, the role of the ARVN in the war is often addressed, which is understandable given that the ARVN was so heavily politicized that it and the South Vietnamese state apparatus were very nearly one and the same. But there are very few works that directly address what the ARVN was, why it was, and why it was seemingly so unsuccessful.

It can be argued that the ARVN was the most critical player in the Vietnam War. An "American victory" in the war was only possible if the ARVN learned to translate battlefield success into strategic sustainability in the service of a South Vietnamese state that had earned the loyalty of its people. Toward that end, Americans could win battles, but could not win the war. South Vietnam and its military had to be able to survive once the Americans returned home. Given the historically dim view of the ARVN's capabilities, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the war was hopeless and that the United States had simply "backed the wrong Vietnamese." But the case was far from simple. The ARVN was at war for the entirety of its existence, from 1955 to 1975, never knowing a day of peace. During its tumultuous history the ARVN certainly suffered its share of ignominious failures, from Ấp Bắc in 1963 to Phạm Văn Đĩnh's infamous surrender at Camp Carroll in 1972. There were also,

however, many moments of martial glory, from the recapture of the Huế Citadel in Tet 1968 to the stand at An Lộc in 1972.

The ARVN was huge, numbering more than a million men toward the end of the conflict in a nation that contained a total population of only 18 million souls. As the most functional organ of the state, the ARVN in some ways became the state, with its power reaching down from Saigon and into villages and hamlets. In its war the ARVN lost more than 200,000 dead, and perhaps four times that many wounded. About one in every five soldiers, which translates to nearly one in every twenty adult males in the country, were killed or wounded in the ARVN's service.¹ It is evident that the ARVN fought long and hard, although not always well, in the service of its country. Its service indicates that, while there were famously major sources of resistance to the hamfisted rule of South Vietnam's government, a deep reservoir of military support for a noncommunist nationalism existed in the new country. Although the ARVN eventually cracked under the pressure, its role in the Vietnam War was central, and it was not merely doomed to failure. Understanding what the ARVN was as well as what it was not is key to understanding the Vietnam War's eventual outcome.

Coming to grips with the ARVN as an institution, a practitioner of war, and a social driver is a subject best suited to a series of books and a new historiography. This short chapter can only begin to address some of the main questions of the ARVN's complex history and perhaps pose new questions that might spark future inquiry. Consequently this chapter will first focus on who and what the ARVN was, looking at manpower and ideology. Next the chapter will move into the realm of the ARVN's kinetic abilities both in the war for the "hearts and minds" of the people and in the big-unit war of search and destroy. Within these two basic areas – of the ARVN as an institution and as a military tool – are keys to understanding both the ARVN's manifest military abilities and its eventual downfall.

Who and What the ARVN Was

History matters in Vietnam, a land in which the nation's glorious martial past is learned by every schoolchild and where families revere their long-departed ancestors. Both the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) and

1 Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2016), 12–13; Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1995), 296.

the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) did their utmost to tie their causes directly to Vietnam's storied history, attempting to create linkages to everyone from the Trưng Sisters (Hai Bà Trưng) to Emperor Nguyễn Huệ Huệ to cloak their causes in historic legitimacy. As regards Vietnam's more recent past, the communists' task was decidedly easier. While brutal and often divisive, Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh could claim legitimacy as victorious freedom fighters against both the Japanese and the French. The ARVN's claims, though, were harder to stake, a problem that would dog both South Vietnam and its military for the entirety of the war.

The ARVN was saddled with the societal albatross of being a direct descendant of French colonial forces in Vietnam. During their colonial heyday the French had created indigenous units to serve alongside their own forces in Vietnam. Given little authority or independence, these indigenous units held only a limited appeal to a colonized people. Reeling from World War II, and facing the rise of the Việt Minh, the French altered their ruling structure in Vietnam in 1950, beginning the process of helping to raise and train the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) to serve and help legitimize the newly "independent" Vietnam ruled by Emperor Bảo Đại. The new VNA would stand alongside units of the French army in the ongoing struggle against the Việt Minh. Unlike French army units, which were made up of a blend of troops from both France and its many other colonies, the VNA was meant to be a purely Vietnamese affair, a force of local Vietnamese rallied to the anticommunist cause.

A draft call went out to fill the ranks of the new army, but most of the VNA's officers and men initially were drawn from volunteerism and the indigenous colonial units. Little has been written on the fascinating history of the VNA, which served a hybrid colonial state as the French were arguably looking to wind down their empire. The Vietnamese who served in the VNA, and fought against the Việt Minh, did so for a variety of reasons. Most saw Bảo Đại and the hereditary imperial house as the best truly Vietnamese option to a waning French colonialism. Others were driven by a dislike and distrust of communism and its avowed atheism.² Historic linkages to Vietnam's imperial glory and an aversion to intrusion by the European philosophy of Marxism were powerful cards to play in the important game of legitimacy, but there still remained the problem of the VNA's service alongside the French, who were not going down in Vietnam without a fight.

2 For a more complete accounting of the most recent historiography on the VNA, see Francois Guillemot, "'Be Men!' Fighting and Dying for the State of Vietnam (1951–1954)," *War and Society* 31, 2 (August 2012), 184–210.

The VNA was arguably only just hitting its military stride by the time of the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, having expanded to a force of more than 200,000.³ By that stage in the conflict the VNA was much more reliant on the draft and, since it mainly fought alongside and was dependent on the French, had only a rudimentary general staff, no artillery, no heavy armor, no logistic capability, and few Vietnamese officers above the rank of lieutenant. At the close of the French Indochina War, some VNA members simply went home, while others defected to the Việt Minh. For many, though, especially those officers who had trained at Đà Lạt (the Vietnamese National Military Academy) and the enlisted men raised after the waning of French power, a true sense of Vietnamese nationalism – noncommunist nationalism – remained.⁴

As the Republic of Vietnam struggled to coalesce in its early days, and as newly arrived Americans jostled for positions of power, the ARVN rose from the ashes of the VNA. The ARVN's lineage allowed the communists to tar the ARVN with the claim that it was merely a fossil of French colonialism. But, especially early in the new war, the ARVN had a real chance to seize the mantle of being a nationalist, noncommunist alternative to the Việt Minh. From the Catholic minority, to believers in democracy, to student activists, to Buddhist monks, to Cao Đài adherents, to newspaper editors – there was a wealth of potential support for a noncommunist answer to Vietnam's problems of independence and unity. Both South Vietnam and the ARVN had to seize the moment quickly, though, because their Việt Minh adversaries had a considerable headstart both in terms of legitimacy and motivation.

In the early years of the Vietnam War, before it had morphed into an American war and a superpower conflict, South Vietnam fought a lower-level form of warfare, one that was arguably more locally sustainable given the country's agrarian wet-rice agriculture economy. While there was already great pressure from the Americans to create an ARVN that prosecuted a First World manpower- and firepower-heavy style of warfare, the ARVN, although it looked Western, was still something that Vietnamese history would recognize. In 1960 the ARVN counted 150,000 troops, fewer than the total that had once served in the VNA.⁵ There was compulsory military service for males age 20–22, who owed the nation an eighteen-month commitment.⁶ Roughly

3 Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, "The RVNAF," in Lewis Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals* (Lubbock, TX, 2010), 4.

4 Guillemot, "'Be Men!'" 208–9.

5 Jeffrey Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, DC, 1988), 12.

6 Nathalie Huyhn Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers*, 20.

half of the soldiers were volunteers, and their military commitment was as yet well within the societal realities of a country, the vast majority of whose citizens still worked in the very labor-intensive vocation of rice production.⁷ It was in these early days of the Vietnam War, when volunteerism was still high, that the ARVN had its best opportunity to seize a nationalist mantle.

Much of my research on the ARVN has centered on the lives of two of its young stars: Phạm Văn Đính, who rose to command of a regiment by 1972 before eventually surrendering in the Easter Offensive and defecting, and Trần Ngọc Huế, who achieved the rank of battalion commander by the time of the Lam Sơn 719 invasion of Laos, was captured, and served thirteen years in prison before emigrating to the United States.⁸ My research has also included interviews with many ARVN veterans who served with either Đính or Huế, and has since come also to include interviews with the burgeoning Vietnamese expatriate population in the Mississippi Gulf Coast and New Orleans. I also worked extensively in the rather underground world of Vietnamese expatriate writings and in the interview collections both at the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University and the Vietnamese Oral History Project at the University of California, Irvine. However extensive their information, sixty interviews and access to numerous Vietnamese autobiographies and stories provide only the smallest glimpse into the complex reality that was the ARVN's war. But even this limited sample group can serve as a starting point, a lens through which to envision the ARVN's experience, allowing commonalities to emerge.

For those ARVN officers and men whose service began during the early phase of the Vietnam War, motivation was high, as was hope for the future. Born in 1937 and 1942 respectively, both Phạm Văn Đính and Trần Ngọc Huế were from middle-class families, Đính from a Catholic background while Huế was a Buddhist. Đính's father, Phạm Văn Vinh, and Huế's father, Trần Hữu Chương, both served in the VNA. The patriarchs of both families saw communism as an outside, European influence in their nation. Both families also boasted a martial history that traced back for generations. Men in the

7 Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence, KS, 2006), 7–8. One of the main themes of Brigham's path-breaking work is that the ARVN shifted to a Western model of a military buildup in service of a type of warfare that was unsustainable by the reality of Vietnamese economy and culture.

8 Much of my work can be found in Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York, 2008). Beyond 2008 I have continued to gather oral histories of ARVN veterans from the Gulf Coast and New Orleans communities. Those interviews are housed in the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg and are open for use.

families had always been warriors, and for Vinh and Chương fighting for the VNA of Bảo Đại had seemed the most Vietnamese way to express their martial nationalism – a lesson that both men passed on to their many children.

As was common across Vietnam in its civil war, both Đính and Huế had relatives in the Việt Minh, but both came to believe that it was the VNA and later the ARVN that best represented Vietnamese nationalism. For Phạm Văn Đính the decision to support a noncommunist nationalism just seemed natural. It was his patrimony and his duty to both family and country. Trần Ngọc Huế had a more visceral reason to support a noncommunist form of Vietnamese nationalism, having witnessed the Việt Minh burying captive VNA soldiers alive following a battle near Huế. Đính and Huế thus began their wars from the same place: from a nationalism that fired many of their generational compatriots. Phạm Văn Đính entered Thủ Đức Reserve Officers School in 1961, and Trần Ngọc Huế entered the Vietnamese National Military Academy at Đà Lạt in 1962.

Having relatives who served in the VNA was a common bond for many who chose to serve in the ARVN. The father of Nguyen Van Lanh, born in Quảng Trị in 1941, had served in the VNA, and had been captured by the communists at the end of the French Indochina War. Lanh would always remember how his father had been mistreated by the communists and saw North Vietnam as an existential threat to Vietnam and things Vietnamese. In his mind he fought for freedom and saw nothing but enthusiasm and wholehearted service in those early years of the war. Born in Saigon in 1935, Nhut Van Tran joined the VNA in its last days, realizing that the French would soon be on their way out of power. He believed that the VNA would outlive the French and would be the way forward to a noncommunist future. He felt that he was fighting for the “real Vietnam.” Similarly, the father of Trần Thanh Chiêu, born in 1927 in Tam Kỳ, was a politician in an anti-French but noncommunist political party. With politics all around him growing up, Chiêu first joined the Việt Minh, until Bảo Đại was made the head of the French-aligned Vietnamese state in 1950. At that point Chiêu changed allegiances, joining the VNA toward the end of its short life and then moving into the ARVN. Having seen the Việt Minh from the inside, he believed that it was South Vietnam that offered his people a more viable Vietnamese solution to their problems.⁹

9 Information in this paragraph comes from oral interviews housed at the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock [hereafter cited as TTUVA] and at the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi [hereafter cited as USM].

As Vietnam began a long and violent transition in the wake of French defeat, there were many decisions to be made about what it meant to be Vietnamese. Many chose not to choose, and others chose to follow the successors of the Việt Minh. Millions, though, chose a different path, one that is often dismissed by historians: adhering to a form of nationalism that did not follow the communist ideals of the Việt Minh, a choice not invalidated by its eventual defeat. The experiences and viewpoints chronicled above do not preclude counterexamples of Vietnamese soldiers who served unwillingly and perhaps poorly. But these few examples stand as representative of a new military generation that was not beholden to the French, but was dedicated to the idea of a noncommunist, independent Vietnam, and part of a US-centric military. These men represented the ARVN's future – a future that was especially bright in its early years.

As the Vietnam War intensified, though, its appetite for bodies – American, Vietnamese, Korean, Australian – grew by leaps and bounds. By 1963 the ARVN had grown to 250,000. By 1969 it mushroomed to more than 800,000 strong, with the majority of males between sixteen and fifty called up for military service, with some owing a seven-year enlistment to their country. The results were devastating to a Vietnamese society that relied on men to work the fields to plant and bring in the rice crop. As the war sputtered on with no end in sight, punctuated with disastrous moments in time such as the Tet Offensive of 1968, there is little wonder that volunteerism could do little to keep up with the ARVN's appetite for new recruits. The result was an ever more draconian draft system, one that preyed especially on rural laborers and one that resulted in one of the most heavily drafted armies in modern history. It was a staggering effort, with one US official reporting that if the United States had mobilized a similar proportion of its adult male population that it would have sent 8 million men per year to Vietnam.¹⁰

Maintaining ARVN morale for the long haul of the Vietnam War in the face of so many challenges – lengthy service when soldiers were needed at home to bring in the rice harvest; year after year of grueling war; few signature victories coupled with tremendous attrition; a state that was rife with discord and political infighting; a superpower ally who was progressively more tired of conflict – required a unifying ideology and a positive call to arms to fight in service of a South Vietnamese state that was worthy of sacrifice. That the

¹⁰ Brigham, ARVN, 8–11; Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers*, 19–21; Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," in Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War*, 141.

government of the Republic of Vietnam and the ARVN failed in this regard was perhaps *the* deciding factor of the war.

As the government in Saigon provided little leadership, lurching from crisis to crisis, and with no workable solution emanating from Washington or Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), those within the ARVN realized early on that problems of motivation and perception were deadly serious. Both Phạm Văn Đính and Trần Ngọc Huế realized as young officers that the ARVN had begun its life at a disadvantage, not in tactical prowess but in the critical psychological war for both the motivation of the ARVN's troops and the "hearts and minds" of the people. The ARVN's communist adversaries could claim to have gained victory over the French and to be the purveyors of a national war for independence. The ARVN, though, could be seen as a relic of the colonial past, which gave the communists a critical edge.¹¹ As a result Đính believed that the ARVN had to do a better job of convincing the people of the evils of communism and of the righteousness of its own cause. That task had to begin with the soldiers who made up the rank and file of the ARVN: the men who would defend the state of South Vietnam as well as function as the most compelling image of that state. However, since the Saigon government lived in constant fear of a military coup, nationalism and patriotism played an insignificant role in ARVN training. In the words of ARVN enlisted man Nguyen Van Chau, "Most soldiers that I knew understood little about why we were fighting. Anticommunism was more abstract to us than scientific political theories. Not once did any of my instructors mention a proactive political agenda."¹² When he was drafted after Tet '68 enlisted man Dan Nguyen remarked, "I followed orders and went blindly but didn't know why I had to go. We had to go because the war came. No one questioned it. No one thought about the reason they were forced to go."¹³

While the communists concentrated much of their efforts into indoctrinating their soldiers regarding the need for their fight, the ARVN continued to concentrate its efforts on the mechanics of training, which left ARVN soldiers technically sound but at a critical disadvantage against their more politically astute foes in the areas of morale and leadership. Every ARVN expatriate officer and enlisted man I have ever interviewed has mentioned a lack of indoctrination and a unifying political will as being key to the ARVN's dismal

11 Bui Tin, "Fight for the Long Haul: The War as Seen by a Soldier in the People's Army of Vietnam," in Andrew Wiest (ed.), *Rolling Thunder* (Oxford, 2006), 60.

12 Brigham, ARVN, 41.

13 Interview of Dan Nguyen, December 5, 2011, Vietnamese American Oral History Project, University of California, Irvine.



Figure 7.1 Soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (1968).

Source: Stuart Lutz/Gado / Contributor / Archive Photos / Getty Images.

fate. Historian Robert K. Brigham found much the same in his own work. Former ARVN intelligence analyst Cao Van Thu recalled, “The Communists did an excellent job in ideological training, even if the party’s message was pure propaganda. In South Vietnam we did nothing to prepare the countryside for the needed sacrifice.”¹⁴ Nguyen Van Thanh explained, “When I first joined the army in 1962, I did so because I was patriotic. I loved my new country of South Vietnam and hated the Communists. Over time, however, I had a hard time explaining the political nature of my country. So many leadership changes in Saigon and dependence on the Americans made it impossible for me to talk about the nation.”¹⁵

As the French withdrew after Geneva, and hope was high in the South for a noncommunist form of nationalism, volunteerism had been high, attracting millions of true believers like Trần Ngọc Huế, Phạm Văn Đĩnh, and Nguyen Van Thanh. Other nations had been born in war, but the ARVN arguably

¹⁴ Brigham, *ARVN*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43–4.

never coalesced into a military force possessed of a unifying political ideology. The war progressed and morphed into a superpower conflict that, by 1974, saw 1.1 million men serving in the South Vietnamese military. Lieutenant General Đồng Văn Khuyên recalled that “South Vietnam had scraped the bottom of its manpower resources. Every household, therefore, had at least one member in the military service.”¹⁶ Without a unifying ideology – a positive motivator for the fight – that phenomenal level of sacrifice was untenable in service of a war that had dragged on for nearly twenty years. Even the mighty United States had tired of the conflict after far less cost.

The War in the Villages

As a military force, after 1965 the ARVN largely served as an adjunct to its mighty American ally. The main battlefield effort during General William Westmoreland’s high-tempo years of warfare fell to US units, which sought to lock main-force People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) units into battle and destroy them. Although there were many levels of cooperation, the ARVN was essentially moved aside as US forces endeavored to win their war for them. From the Mekong Delta to the demilitarized zone, the ARVN was there in most of the major battles, but in a purely subsidiary role – never central to the planning or prosecution of the mission. But, in the main, ARVN field units were relegated to a second level of warfare. US units were first tasked with driving enemy forces from an area; the ARVN was then tasked with not allowing them back. In a war with no frontlines, the ARVN’s role was still deadly serious, but without agency. In its new role the ARVN did not really function as divisions or corps, but instead was broken into far smaller groupings – better with which to search for and destroy local PLAF and PAVN forces. Relying on the primacy of US-provided fire support, the ARVN won the vast majority of its battles, but many of the ARVN’s best commanders chafed at their lot in military life and wondered aloud if the ARVN was being used to the best of its abilities.¹⁷

Trần Ngọc Huế was a company commander, while Phạm Văn Đính had risen to the rank of battalion commander during this stage of the war, and both suspected that the ARVN’s conduct of the war was flawed. Their units would drive the remaining National Liberation Front (NLF) forces from an

¹⁶ Khuyen, “The RVNAF,” 89.

¹⁷ General Ngo Quang Truong, “RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination,” in Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War*, 143.

area, declaring it “pacified.” Once the ARVN departed, though, the NLF would return to live with the people, earning or forcing their support, and quite possibly governing them. While search-and-destroy tactics seemed militarily effective, both Đính and Huế realized that ARVN tactics achieved little meaningful success in the war for the hearts and minds of the people. The ARVN in their view was “fighting the wrong war.” Đính and Huế represented many young ARVN officers in their belief that the ARVN should make better use of its territorial forces, locally raised units who were of the people and intimately familiar with the area, to provide true and meaningful rural security.¹⁸

The South Vietnamese had founded the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps, groupings of paramilitary forces, in 1955, initially tasking them with internal security duties while the ARVN focused on stabilizing the new state. The South Vietnamese supported the creation of these local territorial forces in the hope that they could play a significant counterinsurgency role alongside the ARVN. The idea, though, was largely stillborn, with the United States focusing mainly on a more traditional military force in South Vietnam, initially leaving the territorial forces out of the Military Assistance Program. It was not until 1964, long after the communist insurgency was well underway, that the territorial forces were even integrated into the ARVN command structure, becoming known as the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). In their new incarnation the RF/PF enjoyed a somewhat less chaotic command structure, and assumed their roles as defenders of the provinces, districts, villages, and hamlets of South Vietnam. However, the attention and improvement had come ten years too late and could not quickly overcome years of neglect and stagnation.¹⁹

Only recently reclaimed from the military scrapheap, the RF/PF suffered from a nearly complete lack of training.²⁰ In units often made up of luckless draft evaders and deserters who had got caught up in police sweeps, those with military experience were left to instruct those without “on the job” training.²¹ After 1964, with the belated American recognition of the important

18 Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 46; interview of Tran Thanh Chieu, March 28, 2013, Oral History Project, TTUVA; interview of Nhut Van Tran, April 6, 2008, Vietnamese American Oral History Project, University of California, Irvine; interview of Vũ Văn Giai, August 18, 1999, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, USM.

19 Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 74.

20 General Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: Territorial Forces* (Washington, DC, 1980), 54.

21 General Ngo Quang Truong, “Territorial Forces,” in Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War*, 192, 194.

security function of the territorial forces, there began something of a crash course of training for RF/PF units, but that training still lagged up to 60 percent behind desired goals.²²

Leadership was always a problem for the RF/PF, in part because their commanders were the district and province chiefs – ARVN officers who also ruled as local political governors. The blending of tasks left the RF/PF often split between two functions: the military and the political. Making matters worse, the RF/PF carried outdated weaponry, receiving US armament of World War II vintage including the M-1 carbine only after 1960. At the same time NLF units began to receive AK-47s and RPG-7s, seriously outclassing the organic firepower of the RF/PF, which also received the lowest priority for fire support of all kinds, and thus could not even normally call upon the massive US/ARVN preponderance in artillery and airpower to tip the balance of battle in their favor. When all else failed for US or ARVN units, firepower could save the day, but not so for the RF/PF. A study of III Corps in 1967 revealed a disturbing reality that, of 234 RF/PF friendly-initiated actions in which calls went out for fire support, in nearly 200 cases no such support was forthcoming.²³

Spread thinly across the countryside in their stationary tasks of protecting hamlets, villages, and bridges, RF/PF outposts quickly became a favorite target for massed PLAF or PAVN attacks. The situation was at its worst in 1968 as some 477 RF/PF outposts were overrun during the first month of the Tet Offensive.²⁴ Additionally, while ARVN and US divisions, brigades, and battalions could rest and recuperate, or even just find a time of lull in their combat duties, the same could not be said of the small-unit war of the territorial forces. In a war with no frontline, the RF/PF were always on the frontline, with no safe haven and no rest and recuperation. Instead the RF/PF faced a war of constant engagement, always on patrol and always on alert for an enemy that could be anywhere – even in their own villages and hamlets. For the RF/PF war was the state of daily life, a slow and never-ending attrition lasting in some cases for twenty years.

In 1967 Phạm Văn Đính took over as district chief of Quảng Điền district outside Huế. Quảng Điền district contained a population of some 46,000

22 Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, *Vietnam Studies: The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950–1972* (Washington, DC, 1975), 42; Thomas R. Cantwell, “The Army of South Vietnam: A Military and Political History, 1955–1975,” Ph.D. dissertation (University of New South Wales, 1989), 180.

23 Truong, *Indochina Monographs: Territorial Forces*, 97–8.

24 *Ibid.*, 97.

people in 8 main villages and a collection of scattered subsidiary hamlets. As was all too common in South Vietnam, Đính found that two territorial companies in the district and the territorial platoon fielded by each village were in disarray, leaving the NLF dominant in half of the villages and hamlets of the district and in control of much of the area's resources. The units' leaders were often absent, the units themselves were chronically understrength due in part to desertion, and the soldiers were poorly armed and had no training whatsoever. The situation was so bad that Đính had to stand down his territorial units and start from scratch.²⁵ Local studies of the actions of the ARVN and the RF/PF in South Vietnam indicate that what Đính found in Quảng Điền district was far from an isolated situation and that the tactics, training, and kinetic utilization of RF/PF forces remained a real issue long after US forces embarked on a crash course of training for the RF/PF in 1968.²⁶

For all of their faults and foibles, the RF/PF fought hard in the Vietnam War. In the period 1968–72, when some of the most intense fighting of the war took place and the RF/PF had risen in importance both to the Americans and to the ARVN, RF/PF losses were 69,291 killed in action (KIA), compared to the ARVN's loss total of 36,932, and American losses of 30,005.²⁷ Motivated by the fact that they were defending their home provinces and villages against communist attack, RF/PF troops often fought hard and well, against seemingly all odds. General Ngô Quang Trưởng remarked: "In spite of apparent lack of adequate indoctrination the RF/PF continued to fight valiantly and without remiss until the final days of the drawn-out war ... As local combatants they fought to protect their home villages where they were born and where their ancestors were buried."²⁸ Given their military lot in life it is amazing that the RF/PF fought as long and hard as they did. Even poorly trained, even poorly armed, even at the bottom of the logistic chain, even poorly led, the RF/PF fought on, indicating a local strength of support for the Republic of Vietnam and a noncommunist nationalism that is often missed in the bigger picture. Leaving the territorial forces relegated to the sidelines for so long

25 Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 79–80.

26 See Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley, 1972); Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, 1990); Kevin Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969–1971* (Lawrence, KS, 2016); Robert Thompson III, *Clear, Hold, and Destroy: Pacification in Phu Yen and the American War in Vietnam* (Norman, OK, 2021). See also Khuyen, "RVNAF," 76–9.

27 RF/PF losses are taken from Truong, "Territorial Forces," 207; US and ARVN losses are taken from James H. Willbanks, *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York, 2010), 529.

28 Truong, "Territorial Forces," 203.

ultimately crippled the war efforts of both the ARVN and the US military in the Vietnam War – a mistake that was rectified far too late and that helped to doom both the American war effort and South Vietnam to defeat.

Kinetic Abilities

From chronic desertion and graft, to the underutilization of its territorial components, to rampant politicization, the ARVN had its flaws – some of which might have indeed been fatal. Bright young officers such as Phạm Văn Đĩnh and Trần Ngọc Huế, and their seniors, such as Ngô Quang Trưởng and Vũ Văn Giai, knew that neither the ARVN nor the state that it served could win the war singlehandedly. Their greatest hopes by far were pinned on the notion that the ARVN and the Republic of Vietnam would reform and come of age while US troops provided a shield of defense against communist aggression. In some ways, though, the intervention of US ground forces into the war had the opposite effect. The ARVN was vastly overshadowed in its own war, relegated to second place, where its commanders had little opportunity for strategic learning or tutelage. On one hand the ARVN military staffs had little chance to learn their operational craft at anything above a company or perhaps battalion level, stymieing military growth and maturation especially at the senior levels. On the other hand, at the highest political and military echelons, where the ARVN needed systemic reform, there was no urgency whatsoever. Why did the ARVN or the state it served need to go through the painful process of reform when the United States would always step in to save it from itself and destruction? There grew in the ARVN, especially at its politicized pinnacle, a decided tendency to “let the Americans do it all.”

Regardless of whether or not it was maturing and preparing for its eventual military independence, the ARVN kept right on winning battles in its subsidiary role alongside the Americans during the height of the Vietnam War. US firepower, as it happened, was the great equalizer. General Ngô Quang Trưởng, perhaps the ARVN's most gifted combat leader, commented:

The powerful US tactical air and artillery firepower provided ARVN combat units with ... most effective and accurate support and assisted them in winning several major battles. Vietnamese commanders and troops alike were entirely confident of this support effectiveness ... The lavish use of firepower, however, became ingrained in Vietnamese tactics and became a bad habit. Whenever contact was made with the enemy, regardless of size or firepower, ARVN units invariably requested all-out fire support by artillery and tactical air; they took less interest in the unit's organic weapons, light or

heavy. This overreliance on heavy firepower more often than not amounted to waste and overkill.²⁹

Firepower, as it turned out, was addictive. It made the ARVN supreme on the battlefield over its communist foes. However, its use, alongside the tendency to let Americans do it all, merely served to paper over the ARVN's considerable flaws.

Even though their efforts were well intentioned, the US advisors who served with ARVN units became part of the institutional problem. US advisors often maintained warm relationships with their ARVN counterparts, and their counsel often proved of immense value. The advisor's chief role, though, was to serve as the conduit to American firepower. When locked in battle, ARVN officers turned to their advisors to request, plot, and deliver the firepower that so often proved decisive. The relationship between US advisor and ARVN counterpart was often tactically productive, but came at a steep institutional price. General Cao Van Vien remarked:

Gradually, the ARVN commander's passivity made him excessively reliant and sometimes totally dependent on his adviser. The end result was that the commander's initiative, sense of responsibility and personal authority became seriously affected and in the long run, the adviser's presence had the undesirable effect of reducing his counterpart's chances for asserting and developing his command and leadership abilities.³⁰

After the American withdrawal from Vietnam began in the wake of the Tet Offensive, there were real efforts on the part of MACV and advisors all over the country to help the ARVN come of age and wean it from its reliance on US firepower. However, after so many years of fighting as an adjunct alongside its superpower partner, the ARVN's problems were so ingrained as to frustrate quick fixes. Those problems, along with the ARVN's considerable abilities, were perhaps best displayed in the 1971 Lam Sơn 719 invasion of Laos.

Battle

The ARVN that invaded Laos in 1971 was a military force that was built imperfectly on the American model. It was a military force that was trained to act

29 Truong, "RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation," 151.

30 General Cao Van Vien, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The US Adviser* (Washington, DC, 1980), 58.

as an adjunct to the American war effort – a force accustomed to operating in small units against a local enemy while the Americans fought the “big-unit war.” It was a military force that had become dependent upon advisors and the firepower they provided. It was a military force built for a specific purpose that now embarked on a multidivisional campaign against a determined and well-prepared foe in the biggest battle to date of the “big-unit war.” American national furor over the 1970 invasion of Cambodia meant that the ARVN had to operate in Laos without its American advisors, without its lifeline to firepower support. Making matters worse, ARVN plans for the invasion of Laos rested on something of a best-case scenario, hoping that the PAVN would not defend the area vigorously but would instead fall back to avoid losses as it had in Cambodia the year prior. Instead, though, the North Vietnamese decided to stand and fight, and the South Vietnamese invading force of approximately 17,000 men squared off against a North Vietnamese force that was estimated at 60,000 troops consisting of 5 divisions, 2 separate infantry regiments, 8 regiments of artillery, 3 engineer regiments, 8 sapper battalions, and 6 anti-aircraft regiments plus rear service and transportation units.³¹

Under the auspices of the ARVN’s I Corps, Operation Lam Sơn 719 aimed at the destruction of Base Area 604 in and around Tchepone – a main terminus of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Operations began on February 8, 1971, and initially progressed well with the 1st Armored Brigade making a relatively rapid advance down Route 9 to A Luoi under the flank protection of ARVN Rangers and Airborne, which seized hilltop firebases to the north of Route 9 and the ARVN 1st Division, which performed the same function in the south. Within four days, though, the situation began to deteriorate and become desperate. The armored thrust bogged down, while to the north the PAVN laid siege to the firebases held by the Rangers and the Airborne. As the ARVN armor disobeyed orders and essentially sat stationary on Route 9 and speculated the battle, several of the northern firebases were overrun, leading to heavy losses and a media nightmare as US helicopter pilots – braving their own personal hell – returned with some desperate ARVN soldiers even clinging to skids of the overloaded craft. Although communist forces in Laos were taking a fearsome beating from US airstrikes, Lam Sơn had gone awry.

Realizing that the prestige of the ARVN, and South Vietnam, was on the line, I Corps commander Lieutenant General Hoàng Xuân Lãm in consultation with President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu chose to take a great risk. Instead of

31 Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 274.

withdrawing in the face of massive communist resistance, and against advice from many of the ARVN's forward commanders, Lãm and Thiệu chose to continue the advance, utilizing troops from the 1st Division, which to this point had been spared the worst of the battle.³² The audacious plan involved a series of successive heliborne leaps from hilltop to hilltop south of Route 9. The advance initially caught PAVN forces in the area off guard, and on March 6 120 Huey helicopters (often known as slicks) landed in Landing Zone Hope outside Tchepone in the single-largest airmobile operation of the entire war. For four days ARVN troops plundered the PAVN logistics hub unmolested. Next, though, came the most difficult part of the operation, a withdrawal under enemy fire with no flank support as the PAVN massed for a series of counterattacks.

Soon many of the isolated 1st Division firebases that dotted the ridge lines south of Route 9 found themselves surrounded and facing overwhelming odds. Heavy anti-aircraft fire thwarted the best efforts of US helicopter pilots to evacuate many of the ARVN outposts. As a result some ARVN units, including Trần Ngọc Huế's 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment, had to fight their way through successive rings of encircling communist forces in an attempt to escape the deathtrap. In a fate common to many ARVN units stranded in Laos, Huế's 2nd Battalion suffered prohibitive losses. Of the more than 400 men who had entered Laos, the 2nd Battalion's advisor counted only 26 stragglers returning to friendly lines in South Vietnam. Trần Ngọc Huế was badly wounded and spent nearly thirteen years in prisoner-of-war and reeducation camps.³³ After its highs and lows, Lam Sơn 719 drew to a close on March 25.

The media, feasting on a steady diet of compelling images generated by the withdrawal, portrayed Lam Sơn as an inglorious failure, while US and South Vietnamese political and military leaders trumpeted the invasion of Laos as a costly but important victory. The historical truth, as is so often the case, lies between the two reactive extremes. The ARVN, constructed as it was to fit neatly into the American matrix of the Vietnam War, exhibited the exact strengths and weaknesses to be expected of a military that had been shunted aside into a backwater of its own war for so long but had suddenly been thrust into the fully fledged reality of the "big-unit war."

32 Interview of General Vũ Văn Giai, April 6, 2008, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, USM. Giai served as the senior forward commander for the ARVN's 1st Division during Lam Sơn 719.

33 Interview of Trần Ngọc Huế, June 6, 2005, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, USM.

It is little wonder that the overly politicized ARVN, which had never operated as coherent divisions, much less a full army corps, was beset by critical leadership failures during Lam Sơn 719. Some upper-level ARVN military leaders, who had in the past often been more concerned with elements of pacification or even political infighting, found the transition to full-out ground warfare difficult. In some ways the command gaffes in Lam Sơn 719 are reflective of an ARVN leadership that was overly protective of its political power and slow to change. In his retrospective on the campaign, Major General Nguyễn Duy Hinh reflected:

The most important problem to be solved was insubordination on the part of general reserve unit commanders who like many other generals considered themselves to be pillars of the regime. The I Corps commander apparently bowed to the political powers of these generals and this adversely affected his conduct of the operation. The unsubmissive attitude of the Marine and Airborne Division commanders was actually inexcusable in that they placed themselves above the national interest and let their personal pride interfere with the task of defeating the enemy.³⁴

Hinh went on to note that the ARVN's signature reliance on US firepower support further haunted its actions in Laos:

Another shortcoming of ARVN units at battalion and lower levels was their failure to maneuver when being engaged. After the first contact, they tended to stop and wait for support rather than conduct probes and maneuver to attack or close in on the enemy. This shortcoming indicated a need for additional training for small-unit leaders.³⁵

Even with its failures of leadership and tactics, Lam Sơn 719 must also be remembered as demonstrating how the ARVN could function effectively. After years of being sidelined, the ARVN was able to extemporize an operation outside its national borders in an area where the PAVN held virtually every advantage. During the operation, ARVN units and soldiers fought hard and well – exemplified by the experience of Huế's regiment, which fended off overwhelming enemy attacks for days before its commander was badly wounded. Such incidents of bravery abounded during Lam Sơn 719, bravery that went unreported then and remains unchronicled by Western historians to this very day. During the fighting the ARVN, aided by the might of US airpower, forced the PAVN to pay a fearsome butcher's bill for the retention

34 Major General Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Lam Sơn 719* (Washington, DC, 1979), 158.

35 *Ibid.*, 161.

of its base areas in Laos. Though the raw numbers remain controversial, at a cost of 3,800 killed in action the ARVN inflicted some 13,000 battle deaths on the PAVN.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Lam Sơn 719 foreshadowed the future of the conflict in South Vietnam. The operation proved that, for all of its flaws, the ARVN had great potential. On the other hand, though, the multiple command failings of the ARVN and the resiliency of the PAVN indicated that the former was incapable of shouldering the burden of the Vietnam War. That Lam Sơn 719 brought about “profound repercussions” among the South Vietnamese people is revealing. Again General Hinh comments:

Despite official claims of a “big victory,” the people still were shocked by the severe losses incurred. Perhaps the greatest emotional shock of all was the unprecedented fact that ARVN forces had to leave a substantial number of their dead and wounded ... It was a violation of beliefs and familial piety that Vietnamese sentiment would never forget and forgive ... Was it a victory or a defeat? Popular sentiment seemed to be aroused by the dramatic accounts and personal feelings of the I Corps troops who returned from Laos. Almost without exception, they did not believe that they were victorious.³⁶

Conclusion

What, then, was the “ARVN experience” of the Vietnam War? Although its role in the Vietnam War is often either dismissed or underreported, the ARVN’s place in the outcome of the conflict was perhaps paramount. Understanding the ARVN’s role in the Vietnam War is essential, in part because this remains a lacuna and in part because its history and fate seem both contradictory and complex. On one hand, the ARVN was born from the wreckage of French colonialism, which seemed to place it at a very nearly fatal disadvantage when pitted against its communist foes, which claimed easy links to legitimacy. Even with that perceived stigma, the ARVN was able to command the loyalty and sacrifice of a sizable chunk of the South Vietnamese population, demonstrating a linkage to a noncommunist form of Vietnamese nationalism. Although the ARVN only partly understood the war of pacification, leaving territorial units poorly trained, partly motivated, and badly undergunned, RF/PF forces fought long and hard, absorbing heavy losses and dealt out considerable damage to their communist foes. For all of its many problems the ARVN’s reach into South Vietnam’s localities through

³⁶ Ibid., 140–1.

the RF/PF was real and profound. Arguably the ARVN was built for the wrong war, was shunted aside by its American allies, and was vastly overreliant on the primacy of US firepower – problems that were on full display in Operation Lam Sơn 719. In spite of these systemic issues, the ARVN achieved considerable battlefield victories throughout its brief history, and even the Laotian debacle was peppered with reminders of what the ARVN could be and might become. The ARVN labored throughout the conflict under the weight of crippling disadvantages and failed comprehensively in 1975. However, that the ARVN sparked loyalty from so many, and fought so long and paid such a heavy price, indicates that there was something there. The ARVN had potential: perhaps potential enough to have won its war under different circumstances. Writing the ARVN off as a historical mistake will no longer do. Understanding the ARVN for the complex entity that it really was, and for the potential it had, is key. A short chapter like this one can but suggest that the ARVN had potential. Seeing the ARVN as a topic worthy of study is the first step.