

## **A War of Attrition**

The war in Vietnam was not fought on traditional battlefields with clearly identified soldiers seizing new territory. Instead, the war was fought with different weapons, markers of success, and consequences than previous wars. Military planners on both sides of the conflict initially hoped to achieve quick success through strategic attacks on the enemy. While initial operations did inflict damage on their opponents, both sides ultimately settled into a war of attrition, a series of relatively small battles designed to deplete the resources of the enemy, weaken their morale and reduce public support for the conflict so that they are willing to surrender.

## **American Military Strategy**

The United States, for example, hoped to defeat North Vietnam through massive bombing campaigns, such as Operation Rolling Thunder. Starting in early 1965, American planes began to drop what would eventually total 4.6 million tons of bombs onto North Vietnam, as well on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a supply line that the communists used to transport people and goods from the north to the south. American commanders intended the campaign to demoralize the Communist soldiers and compliment U.S. ground troops. When President Richard Nixon took office in 1969 he employed a secret plan to end the war, which expanded the American air campaign. He began a secret bombing campaign in the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, sovereign nations separate from Vietnam, in an effort to attack the communist forces hiding in these border nations.

On the ground, American troops conducted “search and destroy missions,” to seek out the enemy and kill them to increase the body count, one measure of American success or failure in the conflict. Helicopters, a new military asset, quickly transported soldiers in and out during these missions. Soldiers burned to the ground many villages that contained suspected communist sympathizers. This displaced many civilians leaving them without food or shelter.

Another tactic the U.S. employed was the use of defoliants and herbicides on the Vietnamese countryside. Hoping to both deplete the communists’ food supply and eliminate their cover from the sky, the US military sprayed, by air and waterways, 12 million gallons of Agent Orange, a variety of defoliants and herbicides, on Vietnam. This campaign destroyed the forests and farmland; millions of Vietnamese and Americans were ultimately exposed to the toxic chemicals.

The United States also tried to gain the support of local people so that they would not aid the communists. American soldiers would go into South Vietnamese villages and (1) determine if locals were providing food or weapons to the communists, and (2) if the villagers were not helping the North Vietnamese, solicit their support through food aid or protection from the enemy.

## **Vietnamese Communist Strategy**

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) employed a different strategy, but with the same goal – consistent pressure designed to weaken American resolve and promote a negotiated peace that favored their side. Employing a guerilla warfare strategy, NVA and VC forces favored hit and run attacks and surprise ambushes over full-scale military conflict. Although American forces benefitted from more training and advanced military technology, NVA and VC forces posed significant challenges to the Americans. Neither the VC or the NVA wore bright uniforms marking their enemy status, making it difficult for American soldiers to differentiate between a civilian and a military combatant. And while many of the VC’s weapons were crude in comparison to American firepower, as the war progressed Communist forces became increasingly proficient in killing and maiming American forces, using home-made booby traps and mines, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns and anti-aircraft artillery imported from the Soviet Union and China. They repurposed the over 20,000 tons of explosive material dropped by U.S. planes for the homemade bombs. The communists also benefitted from a series of tunnels stretching throughout North and South Vietnam. The tunnels allowed for safe travel; stored ammunition, food, and water; provided sleeping quarters; and hospice for those in need of medical aid. The Communists were also aided by many civilians who provided safe haven, food, and support in local villages across South Vietnam.

## **Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive**

Likely the most significant military confrontation of the war occurred in January of 1968, when American troops faced a determined and aggressive communist attack. 40,000 members of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) surrounded Khe Sanh, an American military base just south of the Demilitarized Zone in South Vietnam, home to less than 6,000 Marines. On January 21, 1968, the NVA launched a massive attack against the base, driving the Marines into underground bunkers. The NVA used shells, mortars, and rockets to try to overrun the base and early on, it looked like they'd succeed, especially after hitting the base's ammunition storage, which caused an explosion that killed eighteen, wounded 40, and destroyed 90% of the Marine's ammunition. During the siege, which lasted a total of 77 days, Marines were hunkered down, sheltering in rat-infested underground bunkers that were dirty and lacked sufficient food and supplies. Both President Johnson and the American public were deeply engaged in the crisis – reading daily updates in the papers and watching the latest on nightly news reports on television. American forces outside Khe Sanh ultimately defeated the NVA, by resupplying the Marines manning the base, bringing in food, ammunition, and supplies, evacuating the wounded, and finally bombing the NVA soldiers circling the base into retreat.

On January 30 of the same year, the communists staged their largest military campaign, the Tet Offensive, a surprise attack of nearly all of South Vietnam's major cities and the U.S. Embassy in 1968. Tet, Lunar New Year, had been traditionally observed as a time of cease-fire for Vietnam's most important holiday and with the exception of Khe Sanh, American forces had expected a relatively quiet holiday. In a coordinated attack by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese forces, American troops were at first surprised, but quickly rallied to push back the communist offensive.

## **Prisoners of War / Missing in Action**

Hundreds of American troops were held as prisoners of war (POW) during the Vietnam War. Often, they were pilots and airplane crews shot down as they conducted bombing missions. Many POWs were held in prisons in North Vietnam; the most famous of these was Hoa Lo prison, known to Americans as the "Hanoi Hilton." Conditions in these prisons were exceedingly harsh – beatings and torture were common occurrences, as the North Vietnamese captors sought tactical military information from the American prisoners. The Communists also used the POWs as part of their propaganda campaign, putting them in front of cameras or forcing them to write letters home detailing crimes committed by American forces against the Vietnamese people. Communication between prisoners and with the outside world was restricted – many POWs were held in solitary confinement for years. While some POWs succumbed to their harsh treatment, others resisted by secretly communicating with each other or "confessing" untrue information to trick the Vietnamese military. James Stockdale, a naval pilot who had led aerial attacks from the U.S.S. Ticonderoga in the Gulf of Tonkin was shot down in 1965 and spent the next seven and one-half years as a prisoner of war. John McCain, who was elected to Congress in 1982 and became the Republican Presidential Nominee in 2008, was shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese in 1967, on his 23rd bombing mission in Vietnam. A graduate of the Naval Academy whose father and grandfather had been Admirals; McCain was offered early release by his North Vietnamese captors. McCain refused, believing his family's connections would be used as propaganda by the communists. McCain spent five and one-half years in prison, including time at the Hanoi Hilton. He was repeatedly beaten and tortured. Following his release from prison in 1973 as part of the peace negotiations, McCain was awarded the Silver and Bronze Stars, a Purple Heart, and a Distinguished Flying Cross. 590 American POWs were eventually released by the North Vietnamese; more than 2000 were classified as Missing in Action.

## **The End of the War**

President Richard Nixon shifted America's military strategy with his election in 1968. Nixon advocated a policy of "Vietnamization," which called for gradual reduction of American forces and increasing military leadership by the South Vietnamese. At the same time, Nixon's Secretary of State began secret peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris. These negotiations dragged on for years; a peace treaty between the U.S. and North Vietnam wasn't signed until 1973. In the interim period, the fighting continued and Nixon launched a controversial bombing campaign in Cambodia designed to destroy the supply bases supporting the communist forces. Public support for American involvement in the conflict declined precipitously during the period as well, increasing pressure on the Nixon Administration to end the war. Following the American departure from the war in 1973, South Vietnamese forces continued to fight until they were overrun in 1975 with the fall of Saigon.