

SundayReview

David and Goliath in Vietnam

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There are some events that can be understood only with the perspective of time. The war in Vietnam is one.

It was June 21, 1989, and I was interviewing a diminutive man with four stars on the epaulets of his dark green uniform shirt. We were talking in what had once been the mansion of a French colonial governor in Hanoi. The man was Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietnamese military genius who had led his country to victory, first against France's attempt to reimpose colonial rule in the aftermath of World War II, then against the unparalleled might of the United States when it subsequently sought to permanently divide Vietnam and install a client state in Saigon.

"The American soldiers were brave, but courage is not enough," General Giap said. "David did not kill Goliath just because he was brave. He looked up at Goliath and realized that if he fought Goliath's way with a sword, Goliath would kill him. But if he picked up a rock and put it in his sling, he could hit Goliath in the head and knock Goliath down and kill him. David used his mind when he fought Goliath. So did we Vietnamese when we had to fight the Americans."

General Giap's American opponent, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, was certain that he had the formula for victory in Vietnam. General Westmoreland seemed to be

everything one could desire in a commanding general. He was tall, handsome and articulate. He had led an airborne regimental combat team with distinction in the Korean War, and had attracted the attention of President John F. Kennedy's favorite general, Maxwell D. Taylor, whose patronage had gained General Westmoreland the Vietnam command.

General Westmoreland boasted that he was going to bleed the Vietnamese to death with a huge killing machine he was deploying in their country. Superbly trained Army infantry and Marines would outmaneuver the Vietnamese as fleets of "slick ship" transport helicopters shifted them swiftly from one battleground to another with unprecedented mobility. They would be protected as they landed by a second fleet of "gunship" helicopters with electrically controlled, rapid-firing machine guns and pods of air-to-ground 2.75 inch rockets attached to the sides. They carried their artillery with them, 105 millimeter howitzers slung under the boxy CH-21 "Chinook" cargo helicopters the Army had recently developed.

"Westy," as he liked to be called, was building airfields all over the place. Once on the ground, the troops could summon unlimited strikes by jet fighter bombers stacked overhead, laden with bombs and napalm and white phosphorous, which could burn its way through a man's flesh. There was no limit to the level of explosives that the United States would use to shatter the Vietnamese. The eight-engine B-52 "Stratofortresses" of the Strategic Air Command, created to devastate the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons, would now blast the Vietnamese with the closest equivalent in conventional bombardment — 20 tons of 500-pound bombs dropped from a single aircraft flying at 30,000 feet. When the B-52s struck, the earth trembled for miles in every direction.

The Vietnamese turned to the natural fortress that was their land. In the 1960s the hand of man had hardly touched the mountains of the Annamite chain, which extended from North Vietnam well down into the Central Highlands of the South. The Annamites were then still a primeval place of lonesome peaks and forbidding ridges. Broadleaf evergreen and teak and mahogany rain forest covered all except for the thickets of bamboo and the clearings in the valleys of tall elephant grass. The canopy trees were 60 feet high; below them were the pole trees of mid-height, and then underbrush.

Beneath the trees, the Vietnamese proceeded to create complexes of fortified bunkers. The main bunkers, where the command was located, had lavish protection — a layer of logs, a layer of dirt, and succeeding layers of logs and dirt up to eight or nine feet in height. To knock out one of these bunkers required a direct hit by a 250-pound bomb, a rarity in practice. The smaller bunkers had less but still adequate overhead cover and all were connected by zigzag trenches (a pattern that gave the Vietnamese soldiers additional shelter) deep enough to stand up in and take on the Americans, who at first would have no idea where the enemy was located. Firing lanes were cleared, but otherwise the underbrush was left in place for concealment.

When the American soldier leapt from his helicopter, he was also confronted by a fighting man as well or perhaps better armed than he was. The Vietnamese infantryman wielded the finest of assault rifles — the AK-47. The weapon was the work of a brilliant Soviet firearms designer — Mikhail Kalashnikov. It was fully automatic and rarely jammed, in contrast to the American M-16 rifle, which required constant cleaning to prevent a stoppage. The gallows humor about the AK-47 was that if you dropped it in the mud, you could pick it up, bang it against a tree to clear it, and it would start firing again.

The B-40 rocket-propelled grenade was another product of the Soviet arsenal that the Vietnamese infantryman possessed. Its pineapple shaped warhead at the end of the launcher had formidable blast and fragmentation effect. Nor did the Vietnamese want for any lack of heavier, crew-served machine guns.

It typically took three days of air and artillery bombardment to expose the bunkers by blasting away the trees and other overhead cover. By then the Vietnamese survivors would be gone, carrying most of their dead and wounded with them. Despite all the protection the bunker complexes provided them, the Vietnamese suffered severe casualties. They mitigated their losses to some extent by seizing and holding the initiative. Studies showed that 80 to 90 percent of the time it was the Vietnamese and not the Americans who initiated combat or decided to fight another day. But no one could endure all the violence the Americans could hurl at them and not get hurt. The Vietnamese were, however, prepared to accept these casualties. They were fighting for the reunification and independence of their

motherland, while the American soldier served in a half-conscript, half-volunteer army fighting a war of empire thousands of miles from home.

The “hill fights,” as they were called, unfolded through 1967 as General Giap lured General Westmoreland into one battle after another. The most gruesome occurred in late November 1967 near the outpost of Dak To in northern Kontum Province in the Central Highlands. It became known as “Hill 875” after the military practice of naming a battleground for its height in meters. Colonel Jonathan Ladd, known as Fred, the Special Forces commander in Vietnam in 1967 and a friend from earlier years when he had been an adviser to a South Vietnamese infantry division in the Mekong Delta, told me what had happened.

Fred had a camp at Dak To. It suddenly came under mortar fire. The Special Forces were composed then of mountain tribal mercenaries led by experienced and canny Army noncommissioned officers. Fred flew up to Dak To from his headquarters at Nha Trang on the coast and sent out patrols to ascertain the source of the mortar fire. They discovered that the Vietnamese had built another of these man traps on Hill 875 and adjoining ridges. The mortars were a macabre invitation to a fight for the bunker complex. General Westmoreland was in Washington, called home by a nervous Lyndon Johnson to shore up public support for the war that was being eroded by the high casualties. The general urged patience. He was winning. “The end begins to come into view,” he assured the nation in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington.

General Westmoreland’s subordinates knew what he wanted. The 173rd Airborne Brigade was dispatched to Dak To, along with battalions of the Fourth Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. William R. Peers, a respected officer. As soon as Fred briefed him, General Peers announced that he was going to unleash a heliborne assault on the bunker complex. Fred pleaded with him not to do so. “For God’s sake, General, don’t send our people in there,” Fred said. “That’s what the bastards want us to do. They’ll butcher our people. If they want to fight us, let them come down here where we can kill them.”

General Peers refused to listen, imbued as he was with the Westmoreland doctrine of “Find ’em, fix ’em, fight ’em, and destroy ’em.” The paratroops shouted

“Airborne all the way,” as they fought their way up the slopes. Two hundred and eighty-seven of these troopers and infantrymen from the Fourth Division died. More than 1,000 were wounded. And as always, when the fight was over, the Vietnamese disappeared.

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