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AGDA (M) (10 Jun 70) FOR OT UT 70B016

15 June 1970

SUBJECT: Senior Officer Debriefing Report: LTG Julian J. Ewell, CG, II
Field Force, Vietnam, Period 2 April 1969 through 15 April 1970 (U)

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1. Reference: AR 1-26, subject, Senior Officer Debriefing Program (U) dated 4 November 1966.
2. Transmitted herewith is the report of LTG Julian J. Ewell, subject as above.
3. This report is provided to insure appropriate benefits are realized from the experiences of the author. The report should be reviewed in accordance with paragraphs 3 and 5, AR 1-26; however, it should not be interpreted as the official view of the Department of the Army, or of any agency of the Department of the Army.
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Kenneth G. Wickham

KENNETH G. WICKHAM
Major General, USA
The Adjutant General

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SUBJECT: Senior Officer Debriefing Report - LTG Julian J. Ewell

Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development
Department of the Army
Washington, D. C. 20310

ATTN: FOR OT-UT

1. Reference AR 1-26, dated 4 November 1966.
2. Attached are three copies of the Senior Officer Debriefing Report prepared by LTG Julian J. Ewell. The report covers the period 2 April 1969 through 15 April 1970, during which time LTG Ewell served as Commanding General, II Field Force, Vietnam.
3. LTG Ewell is recommended as a candidate guest speaker at appropriate service schools and joint colleges.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

G. H. MOORE
CIT, ACC
Assistant Adjutant General

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**HEADQUARTERS
II FIELD FORCE VIETNAM**

IMPRESSIONS OF A FIELD FORCE COMMANDER IN VIETNAM

15 APRIL 1970

Julian J. Ewell
JULIAN J. EWELL
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, US ARMY

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IMPRESSIONS OF A FIELD FORCE COMMANDER IN VIETNAM

1. (U) The purpose of this paper is to record my impressions of my tour as the commander of II Field Force Vietnam (IIFV) during the period of April 1969 to April 1970. The situation in IIFV is changing so rapidly that many of the lessons rapidly lose their pertinency. I have, therefore, tried to restrict myself to important aspects which will have a reasonable life expectancy. I frankly admit that these thoughts are not very profound. I seem unable to isolate few black or white principles at this level. Most of the problems are in grey areas.

2. (U) The mission in 1969-1970 has been broadened to include three (and later four) sub-missions: Upgrading ARVN, pacification support, and conduct of military operations. In mid '69 Vietnamization was added. Direct pacification support eased off as pacification progressed and only selective support was required. In our area military operations required considerable emphasis because of the large number of enemy Main Force units about. Due to the urgency and importance of Vietnamization, it (and the necessary ARVN upgrading) has become a primary mission. Actually, everything is so inter-related in this type of war that priorities are only a general guide and the actual application of resources becomes highly judgemental. If one can just keep moving forward in important areas, overall progress follows. However, if subpriorities are carefully thought out, if execution is vigorous and operations continually adjusted, progress can be quite impressive. It is hard to generalize as to how it is done. At least in my experience it is based on a combination of knowledge of the situation, continual pragmatic judgements, an intuitive feel for what the Communists are up to, and an unshakeable determination to get the job done. The intuitive aspect is quite important. I have noticed that my ARVN counterpart (LTG Tri--a fine soldier) and I often listen to staff recommendations and decide on an entirely different course of action because we just "feel" or "see" things differently. In a group of outstanding officers only a certain group (10-25% perhaps) have this "feel." They should be identified early as they can run the war; the others do good work, but their contributions are less decisive. Some never understand it. The Byzantine nature of the war and the indirection required are quite different from the straight forward nature of Korea or World War II.

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3. a (C) To begin with the position and responsibilities of the IFFV Commander are too complex to handle by normal command techniques. The span of control and interest is very wide -- 5 U.S. division equivalents, 5 ARVN division equivalents, eleven provinces (plus Saigon and Vung Tau) plus a host of higher and parallel activities and supporting operations. There is a Deputy Commander (sometimes), a Deputy Senior Advisor (for ARVN) and a Deputy for CORDS (for GVN and pacification). These deputies are essential and a tremendous help but, in a tough operation, which this is, a deputy can't pick up all the blue chips. The intensity and detail required are unusual also. Most real problems still exist because they are inherently difficult and have resisted resolution for years. It takes tremendous drive and attention to detail to resolve such problems. However, the job can be managed. It just takes concentration on essential crises and disasters, considerable sensitivity to set priorities and hard work. I suppose the technique used was management by exception carried to the "nth" degree. The big problems are easy to identify. The prime difficulty is to pinpoint seemingly minor areas or activities which are actually key log jams or choke points. The main frustration one feels is the inability to cover the ground thoroughly and to resolve problems as rapidly as they should be.

b. (U) I also resorted to what might be called "fine tuning". This consists of running over the (rather disordered y) machinery and constantly adjusting and tightening main operations and interfaces. This is useful as one has to push on the Communists at all levels, rapidly exploiting their weaknesses and minimizing our own weaknesses. This could probably be termed a process of sub-optimization.

c. (C) It is just beginning to dawn on me that the maintenance of initiative over the Communists is quite important. They are sluggish and hidebound and, as a result, change direction or react very slowly. If one can keep ahead of them in programs, tactics or whatever, they find it difficult to cope. This obviously calls for good insight, quick decisions and vigorous implementation. I am not selling them short just suggesting that they can be out maneuvered. In recent months the GVN may be "turning inside" the Communists due to a more rapid decision process and execution. If they can continue this quickening of tempo the results would be most useful.

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4. (C) As previously mentioned, due to the wide span of control in III Corps Tactical Zone, it was necessary to resort to considerable management by exception. Operations that were going well were kept under observation mainly to draw valuable lessons for other units and only crisis or disaster areas were really addressed. This system worked reasonably well, particularly in the pacification programs. When a program stalled out or never got started, we would get in and blast the problem up through district, province and corps tactical zone into the various ministries until the problem was resolved and movement could resume. Once this happened, only moderately effective operations succeeded quite well. In this connection, the Central Pacification and Development Council was a tremendous help as it cut through ministerial red tape and coordinated overall operations. In US military operations, the only problem which required real attention was the reorientation of units which could not cope with the difficult techniques of digging the Communists out of the woodwork. Vietnamization (or the upgrading of ARVN units) was also a difficult problem which will be covered separately.

5. a. (C) Based on my general appreciation of the Vietnamese situation and on my previous experience with the 9th Infantry Division, I felt that the key ingredient for successful operations in III Corps was sheer power. Rightly or wrongly I have always felt that the North Vietnamese, particularly COSVN, were more MAOLIST than MAO himself and, as a result, relied to an undue extent on power or force ranging from military operations to terror (as opposed to political activity). This led me to the conclusion that the central theme, the cutting edge as it were, of successful operations against the Communists should be active and effective military operations. Military here is used in the broadest sense. All forces should be used-- regular forces, RF/PF, PSDF, police, etc., etc. For example, pacification is a very powerful tool for separating the people from the Communists, but it progresses more rapidly in an area where the military pressure is high. If one can clobber the Communists, most things become manageable. If one can't, other things become slow and difficult and sometimes impossible.

b. (C) One has to continually remind oneself to be tough in dealing with the Communists. There is an inevitable tendency for people to rationalize civic action, building paved highways and similar good works as being more constructive than eliminating the Communists. This tendency is particularly true nowadays as the Communists keep trying to avoid contact and live to fight another day. As a result, one has to work very hard to

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maintain contact with the Communists and put real pressure on them. As a rough rule of thumb, I would suggest that we should strive to eliminate (i. e. Kill, capture, Chieu Hoi, etc.) 15% of the Communists in a particular area every month. If this is kept up for about 12 months, the consequences are catastrophic for the enemy. This is extremely difficult to do, probably impossible in rough terrain or jungled areas. Our attrition rate in 1969, in III CTZ, overall, was roughly 7-8% per month. So, it would appear that we didn't have the ability or skill to reach the 15% goal and maintain the pressure. However, in the province of Long An we were able to reach the 15% goal for considerable periods of time. As a result, the enemy there became essentially paralyzed and the pacification of this very tough long term VC area proceeded at a rapid rate. I am not minimizing the importance of good civic action projects; just that they are second in importance to force. This all sounds rather primitive and unsophisticated, but shouldn't be. Much skill, finesse and subtlety is required to get to the Communists these days. One operates more with the scalpel than the meat axe.

c. (C) I must admit that force is a rather unpopular and "uncivilized" concept, particularly among certain "sophisticated" groups. However, if one looks over Vietnam for problem spots, invariably they are in areas where, for various reasons, the Communists have been able to maintain a meaningful military presence.

d. (C) From a purely military point of view one should put on "maximum pressure" and "take the offensive" to the enemy over every inch of the area. If this could be done, the war could be over militarily and politically in the shortest possible time. However, with a force ratio of 4 to 1 one can't afford it, there just aren't enough friendly forces. What it ends up with is strong pressure in one or two critical spots, a mobile defense of the inhabited areas and economy of force or reconnaissance operations in the less important areas. In III CTZ in 1969 we put on strong pressure in Long An, medium pressure in Hau Nghia and SR-1, a mobile defense elsewhere, and economized in Phuoc Tuy and the trackless jungle areas. As a result, pacification went well. We now (early 1970) find the enemy has squished out into the low pressure areas and we are now reconnoitering those to find him and deal with him.

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6. (C) The most important tactical idea, which worked out quite well, was to counter the Communist tactics of evasion and dispersion by breaking friendly units down into small unit infantry operations, both day and night. This gave the Communists many problems and resulted in fairly high elimination rates and kill ratios. In order for US units, which turn over about 10% a month, to be able to operate well in small units a rather simplified tactical approach is necessary. However, the Communists are so poor at small unit, mobile warfare that one only has to be fairly good to defeat them decisively with consistent regularity. This change in doctrine took about four months to effect. As a corollary to this thought, unit commanders must be constantly at work to improve their tactics and techniques. It's a little hard to decide which comes first, but in one sense I would suggest that good technique is more important than tactics in this environment. Another way of putting it is that tactics are pretty well understood, however, good tactics get you nowhere if your techniques are sloppy. Therefore, strong emphasis on techniques is important (i. e. daylight patrols, night ambushes, shooting, eagle flighting, etc.). The most important strategic idea was to double team the Communists with a combination of military pressure and a strong pacification effort. Where this combined effort was a reality, the Communists found the going very tough. This strategic concept came from Saigon, all we had to do was implement it. Some people favor a strong pacification effort with a rather defensive military posture. It is hard to generalize, but I consider this very dangerous due to the Communists capacity for hiding out, regenerating their units while maintaining an effective infrastructure.

7. (C) The only unusual operational idea that we devised was a method of working on a tough Communist unit in a difficult base area. This was done in the frame work of the so-called "System." The "system" was devised in 1968 and 1969 and basically entails working on an enemy unit starting at the border and restricting their supplies by attacking rear service troops, carrying parties, etc., combined with a sustained (i. e. for months) direct attack on the units themselves. In order to get to the large enemy units, which by this stage had taken refuge in difficult base areas, it was necessary to concentrate a reasonable number of battalions on him and push them right into the base area. By combining daylight patrols, day and night ambushes and the usual supporting operations twenty-four hours a day the enemy would just be ground down. This was successful only in areas which were opened up by Rome Plowing. (As an aside, rather than clearing the

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entire area, which would have been very time consuming and expensive plow and timewise and would have resulted in the enemy moving unharmed to another place, it was opened up just enough to allow friendly units to work well and gain contacts.) This overall approach was quite useful and resulted in wearing down SR-1, which was one of our toughest opponents, to a tattered remnant of its former self. We also tried it on SR-4, but so far with only limited success, probably due to the greater extent of the base area and the less effective friendly units involved. The main problem is that base areas of this type tend to be located in areas where political boundaries, military boundaries and terrain favor enemy operations. As a result, in order to put the pressure on over a wide area, and we're talking about areas as large as 50 by 50 kilometers, operations must be very thorough and vigorous and well coordinated. This was accomplished to an acceptable extent by a committee type control system with monthly review sessions which kept everyone pointed in the right direction with their nose to the grindstone.

8. a. (U) In retrospect, pacification per se was not a major problem in 1969. However, at the start, it took lots of effort to insure that the eight subprograms and goals were clearly understood at every level. Once that was done it took lots of blasting to clear log jams and red tape to get the paperwork, funds and actual programs rolling. In this connection the Central Pacification and Development Council afforded an essential device to force quick action from the ministries. Once all the spadework was done the program proceeded smoothly. It became apparent that the Communist structure in many areas was more facade than substance. In other areas, however, it was fairly strong.

b.(U)The leadership ability of the province chief is very important. A dynamic, imaginative and honest province chief is needed for a tough area. A moderately effective chief can make good progress in the normal situation. However, a weak province chief tends to stall out if he has any difficulties to speak of. He can be carried along for a while by massive support from above by the advisors and by military units, but sooner or later he stalls out again. In 1969 we had four province chiefs out of eleven in this category. If a province chief begins to falter, he should be replaced soonest. The exception of course, would be where the enemy is making a strong effort, and progress is necessarily delayed while the enemy threat is being beat down.

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c. (U) In most areas the military/security situation controlled pacification progress. This fact can easily be overlooked when the enemy is doing his best to evade. The lack of enemy activity deludes people into thinking the area is more pacified than it really is. One senses that at a certain point pacification develops its own dynamics and drives the political/economic/military equation. However, this point is probably very high on the security scale (perhaps 99% A, B, C, and 85% AB). Up until that point is reached military force is very important.

d. (U) It is probably also true that the development phase of pacification which will be given more emphasis in 1970, will be more difficult than the security phase. To rebuild a highly fragmented political, economic, and sociological structure damaged by years of Communist attacks may take years. For example, the building of a political structure on democratic lines is now in its first stages. This will be a slow, awkward process as the general thrust now, of necessity, is to make the railroad run regardless of political considerations. As more elections are held and political trends and leadership begin to emerge, a transition to a more politically inclined, governmental structure with real roots in the people may take place.

9. (C) There have been several concepts which have come to fruition in the last year which may be worth mentioning:

a. (C) Heavy Reaction to AA Fire: The enemy began a campaign in the summer of 1969 to shoot down as many choppers as possible. Our losses increased somewhat so we decided to have a routine heavy firepower response to any ground fire. All available fires (organic, gunships, artillery, tac air) were concentrated on any ground fire. This held our losses down to a reasonable level and, as a bonus, produced a modest number of enemy kills.

b. (C) Yellow Jacket: A deliberate policy of attacking enemy headquarters was adopted in order to degrade their command and control systems and for other reasons beyond the security classification of this paper. This operation, called "Yellow Jacket", was quite successful in open terrain, moderately so in semi-open terrain and less so in jungle. In Long An province for example, the enemy went back to officer couriers--a rather slow and inefficient system vulnerable to ambushing.

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c. (C) Night Hawk: The 9th Division invented the concept and the 25th Division refined it with a hardware kit which enables a single chopper to engage the enemy effectively at night. The kit is essentially a pink searchlight, a large Night Vision Device and a mini-gun coaxially mounted. It can be put in any Huey and converts it into a night gunship. It is quite effective against high enemy densities and tends to inhibit night movement. It complements night ambushes as it is completely mobile whereas the latter are fixed. A double kit is also available which allows double coverage and minimizes stoppages.

d. (C) Targeting local force units: In order to get at the enemy at the local/pacification level each major unit tried to attrit key local force companies. This is difficult work, but where successful, helped provincial forces (RF, PF, PSDF, police, etc.) quite a bit. They can handle guerrillas and weakened local force units readily. A strong local force company gives them problems. During the past year the effectiveness of local force units has been reduced significantly in many areas.

e. (C) Automatic or mechanical ambushes: This technique was invented by the 8th ARVN Regiment of the 5th ARVN Division. It is essentially a big booby trap using claymores which are put out on a trail the enemy uses. My hunch is that it works well because it has perfect noise discipline whereas an absolutely quiet manned ambush is difficult to achieve.

f. (U) Psy-war operations: We required all units to conduct a super-active psy-war campaign covering all aspects from Chieu Hoi to how inept a certain unit was. I don't know how much it hurt the enemy, but it made us feel better.

g. (C) Mobile Jungle Operations: As the enemy deteriorated and evaded we turned to mobile small unit operations in the jungle. This is very tricky business, but worked quite well, achieving kill ratios in the 15 to 25 to 1 bracket. The gross attrition inflicted on the enemy is not as large as in open terrain, but can be moderately effective.

h. (C) In cases where the enemy resorts to boundary running we use "floating" AO boundaries. This is a series of three parallel boundaries which are segmented and coded. An AO boundary change can be obtained rapidly by means of a phone call or radio message thus facilitating rapid reaction to an intelligence report or contact on or near a boundary.

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i. (U) Rome Plow Operations: In the past, for good reasons, Rome Plow land clearing was done by cleaning large base areas out completely. As mentioned elsewhere, this was very expensive both timewise and plowwise. It also resulted in the enemy moving into another base area relatively unscathed. We, therefore, adopted a technique which resulted in cutting fire lanes or hunting lanes through the base area. The enemy tended to try to maintain himself in place and our units could inflict a heavy toll on him. On highways, due to the decreased effectiveness of the enemy, we reduced our cuts from 1,000 to 200 meters on each side, no great problems ensued.

j. (U) We worked very hard on selecting good targets for B-52 strikes. It is difficult to prove that we improved our results but all the indicators seemed to show that we did.

k. (U) Secondary road program--Once the main national highways were in good shape or under repair, we turned our attention to the secondary road network. The reopening of these roads had a very positive effect on pacification and a very negative effect on the enemy.

l. (C) Communication security--It became abundantly clear in 1969 that the enemy was listening to our radio communications. As a result, we made major continuing efforts to improve our communication security.

10. (C) Vietnamization:

a. (U) Vietnamization was, of course, the primary mission of II Field Force Vietnam in the 69-70 time period. It can conveniently be lumped into two broad areas: ARVN upgrading and the assumption of broader combat responsibilities by ARVN.

b. (U) ARVN upgrading was essentially completed during 1969. The new units were formed and equipped, some TO&E's were improved, and essential training performed. In 1970 the construction engineers and some back up logistical units will be fielded. Essentially this phase of the program is well in hand and quite well done. It requires little extra supervisory effort.

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c. (C) There is, however, a more subtle follow-on problem which is quite important and more difficult to handle. It is almost axiomatic that the professionalism and skill of some ARVN units need considerable improvement. The problem is not to get ARVN to fight, they have the guts and will these days pile into a big contact. The problem is, instead, to get ARVN to bring a highly evasive enemy to battle and keep grinding him down. Practically every ARVN weakness tends to fall into this area and it is most difficult to get good across-the-board, sustained performance. Aggressive platoon and squad operations are necessary and their experienced leaders are fewest at this level. Constant pressure 24 hours a day, seven days a week is necessary. They tend toward maximum effort surges followed by a standdown. Reconnaissance patrols and night ambushes are essential. They prefer to sweep in in large formations by day and conduct defensive operations at night. ARVN doesn't like to fight enemy local force units, or work with RF/PF units. Both are necessary. And so on. It is true that their best commanders catch on readily and do well, the average and sub-standard don't. We (ARVN & US) are attacking this problem in many ways:

- (1) Culling out poor commanders.
- (2) Using combined operations (Dong Tien program).
- (3) Directing the use of small unit operations.
- (4) Trying to develop a sense of urgency and direction.
- (5) All the usual training, advice, inspection, etc., devices

Ideally, we would end up with X ARVN battalions with improved effectiveness which would equal X ARVN battalions (at their present level of efficiency) plus Y US battalions. This is not entirely feasible. The total loss in numbers of US battalions is too great. However, if the enemy continues to deteriorate, it is probably possible to get the ARVN up to where they can handle the overall job with no US battalions and the RF carrying part of the load. The main frustration at this point is that every time the US and ARVN units get peaked up and start damaging the enemy severely, he goes further into the woodwork and our elimination ratio drops. The ARVN elimination ratios (exchange ratio) tend to be low also but show some signs of improving. The entire problem requires complex solutions which will change the psychology, the doctrine and the skill level in small unit operations of the average ARVN unit. So far no magic solution has been found, although we are making concrete progress by hard work.

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d. (C) The assumption of broader combat and security responsibilities by the RVNAF is proceeding reasonably well. The Dong Tien program affords a good vehicle. An ARVN (or RF/PF) and US unit (usually of brigade/regimental size) jointly work an AO. As the RVNAF commanders and units become familiar with it and demonstrate good combat effectiveness, the US unit is progressively withdrawn leaving only the RVNAF unit. In the case of CMD (Saigon defenses) this has worked well. The 1st US Infantry Division/5th ARVN Division swap is not far enough along to judge. We have turned over other areas with good success. Obviously at some point in some areas the lessening of troop density and consequent low aggregate effectiveness could cause problems.

e. (U) We are Dong Tiening the III Area Logistic Command, but it is too early to judge the results. The Area Logistic Command has a top-notch commander, but units are understrength and some key units are new. This is a 1970 job.

f. (U) We were able to obtain a goodly number of seasoned US combat commanders as advisors. This was a big help. New officers from the States are much less effective in the advisory role, initially at least.

g. (C) The possibilities with a good ARVN commander are demonstrated by the 25th ARVN Division which came from last to a high second or third in country in two years. With a tougher and more demanding attitude and more sense of urgency (which we didn't have in '68 and early '69 due to heavy concentration on other matters) it probably could have been done more quickly.

11. (U) The Dong Tien Program: A particularly useful Vietnamization tool was the Dong Tien (Progress Together) program. In 1968 and '69 it was apparent that the 1st ARVN Division was doing extremely well. In looking at its operations a pattern of extensive joint/combined operations with US troops emerged (There were other important factors too as one would expect). For some reason ARVN units in III Corps had always been somewhat stand-offish and avoided US advice, assistance and combined operations. This indicated an informal buddy system might not be workable.

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General Tri and I, therefore, decided to formalize the program and sent out a directive from both our headquarters to conduct extensive combined operations. Units were married up at various levels (Regiment-Brigade down) and even cross reinforced as the program proceeded. The concept proved quite attractive to both US and ARVN commanders. The good effect on ARVN units (and US) was quite marked (although there were exceptions where leadership was weak). The best results were attained where CP's were co-located. A key point was that each commander retained full responsibility (and the US commander was sand bagged if he tried to "take charge"). After six or seven months, the program was reduced to a selective basis (i. e. limited to weak units) and progressively cut back. In our area (III CTZ) at least, formalizing the program was necessary. Formal sub-programs were also set up for Artillery and a III Corps Area Logistics Command--Saigon Support Command program was started in 1970.

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1. (U) In II Field Force one works with the Vietnamese primarily, as well as the Thais (a two brigade division) and the Australians (a three battalion brigade).

2. (C) The Australians are no great problem. There is no language barrier and organization, doctrine and tactics are reasonably compatible. They have several minor characteristics of interest. They have regular battalions which are filled up, trained and serve as a unit. As a result, they are good but as one of their senior officers observed, half in jest and half in earnest, they are too well trained. What he meant was that they tend to practice what they have learned and resist flexibility and innovation. This makes it difficult for them to find and maintain contact with the VC who keep changing their operations to avoid allied contact and pressure. The Australians are also quite locked on to the Malaysia experience which was high on winning hearts and minds and low on eliminating the enemy. The sizeable and widespread enemy presence here doesn't quite fit the Malaysian experience.

3. (C) The Thais are a problem frankly. I have worked with Thais at battalion, regiment and division level to some extent, but still find them difficult. They are the most Oriental of all the Orientals and have considerable self-confidence. As a result, they resist advice rather well. The language barrier is considerable even with Thais who, on the surface, speak English well. Their army is highly stratified, which inhibits direct officer leadership and support. They dislike hard work, offensive operations, small unit operations, night operations and jungle work. They tend to be clannish and don't work well with allies or the local people. However, the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force is a good outfit, well trained and well led. At their best, they are very good--at their normal pace, very good in defending camps and support bases and little else. The art would be to keep them peaked. You have to have a warm affection for them, if they detect any coolness they will lie down in the traces on you. Specific orders often work better than persuasion or mission type orders.

4. (C) The Vietnamese are Orientals too with Chinese and French overlay. This is a tough combination. So much has been written on the subject that I have little useful to add.

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5. (C) An Oriental once told me that Orientals like to remain in a familiar place and operate according to a familiar pattern. Conversely they dislike new places, new missions and new styles of operation. This, if true, explains many of their problems as the war shifts and changes.

J. J. E.

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