



SACEI
www.sacei07.org

A COUNTRY
STAYS ALIVE
WHEN ITS
CULTURE IS
ALIVE.

HOPE NEVER
DIES IN THE
INDOMITABLE
VIETNAMESE
MIND.

- SACEI Newsletter updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.
- It serves as a LINK between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Editorial	1
Drs. Trinh Huu Phuoc & Vo Thi Diep: NASA	1
Khai Duong: Chef	2
Thai Nguyen: Fashion Designer	2
Sources of Vietnamese Tradition	2
True Faith & Allegiance	3

SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese Culture

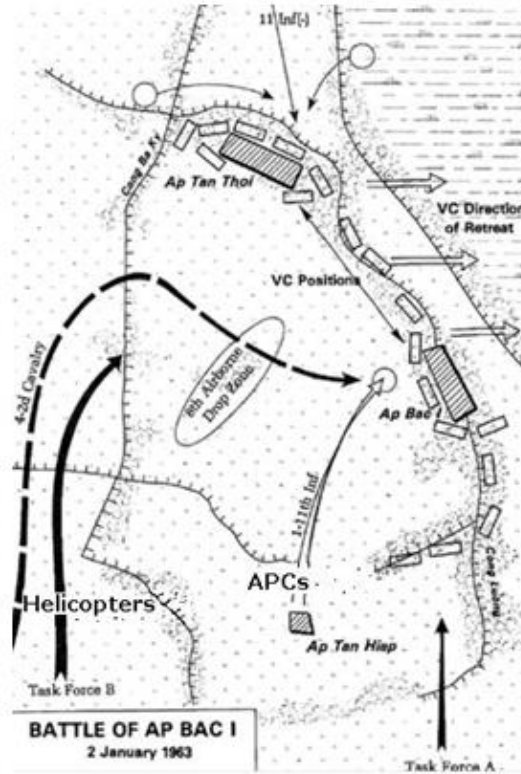
NEWSLETTER # 59

SEPTEMBER 2013

Editorial Note

THE ẤP BẮC BATTLE, REVISITED

NGHIA M. VO



Ấp Bắc was a battle among the hundreds of battles, large and small waged between the Việt Cộng insurgents (VC)

and the South Vietnamese forces in the 1960's. Its impact on the overall Vietnam War was minimal at most, although it was a tactical failure from the US and South Vietnamese, a failure of coordination between the two forces and the various units involved in the battle.

It was the first combined air-cavalry-infantry attack mounted by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the first battalion-size assault conducted by helicopters, and one of the few combined ARVN and guardsmen battles waged in Vietnam. As a result, errors and missed opportunities were unfortunately bound to happen.

It is therefore necessary to revisit the battle of Ấp Bắc on the occasion of its 50th anniversary to have an idea of what had happened that day of 2 January, 1963.

The battle of Ấp Bắc

In late December 1962, U.S. intelligence picked up VC radio signals in the hamlet of Tân Thới in Định Tường Province, home of the 7th ARVN Division. Tân Thới was located about one kilometer and a half northwest of Ấp Bắc (or the hamlet of Bắc), a small, remote, sparsely inhabited hamlet in an area criss-crossed by flooded rice paddies, deep, mud-filled canals and irrigation ditches. Ấp Bắc, sixty kilometers

Continue on p.3

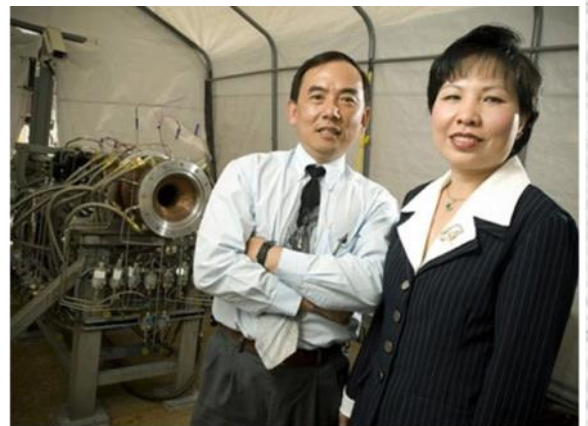
Drs. Trinh Huu Phuoc & Vo Thi Diep: NASA

Dr. Trinh Huu Phuoc and his wife, Dr. Vo Thi Diep are mentioned as a "perfect couple" at NASA. For the past 30 years, they have made many contributions to the U.S. space center.

In 1979, Phuoc left Vietnam at the age of 16 and went to study in the United States where he obtained the aerospace engineering diploma at the University of Missouri-Rolla in 1985.

Two years later, he received a master's degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Missouri-Rolla and then he joined NASA. In 2004, he was granted a doctorate of the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

The first days at NASA, he joined the research group of rocket motor components. Relentless efforts, he repeatedly achieved many impressive successes, including the invention of a new method of pumping fuel into the combustion chamber to help bring optimal performance. He then led a project to develop propulsion system for lunar robot, part of the strategy to pave the way for NASA to continue to conquer other plan-



The "perfect couple"- Dr. Trinh Huu Phuoc and his wife Dr. Vo Thi Diep - Photo: NASA

Drs. Trinh Huucontinued

ets.

Success is what Dr. Phuoc hardly dared to think of but he has achieved thanks to the efficient work methods, beyond the rigid mold. So, he shared with young people who cherish ambition to contribute to NASA in particular and humanity in general, that: "Learning new methods and approaches not only important when you are at school but also at work" -- "Ready to accept the responsibility and challenging work in earnest, self-discipline will give you the most emotionally satisfaction when the task is done."

Dr. Vo Thi Diep is not only a wife but also a fellow of Dr. Phuoc from the years of study in Vietnam until they went abroad, studied and worked at NASA.

Like her husband, Dr. Diep was born in Bac Lieu and left Vietnam in 1979 at the age 17. Going to the United States with limited English, she exerted great effort to receive a bachelor's degree from Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville. Then, she received a doctorate in chemistry at the University of Missouri at Rolla and then joined NASA.

At the U.S. Space Center, Dr. Diep specializes in structural engineering materials. In this field, she marked by the successful development and testing of new materials for rocket engines of the Space Shuttle. To date, Diep and his husband have always been the pride of the Vietnamese people working at NASA and become a model of success in aerospace engineering research.

Khai Duong: Chef



Duong, 52, who fled the country with his family as the Communists defeated U.S.-backed South Vietnam in 1975, explores the varied food of his homeland for his own inspiration -- even in restaurants where beer is the most popular item on the menu.

He graduated first in his class from the world-renowned Le Cordon Bleu Academie d'Art Culinaire De Paris -- and once cooked at Michelin Guide three-star Le Bernardin in New York City.

He is preparing to open two new restaurants in Ho Chi Minh City and is engaged in philanthropic efforts here, including supporting a cooking school for girls and women formerly involved in the sex trade and developing a culinary scholarship program. In the Bay Area, he recently closed Ana Mandara and plans to open a string of smaller restaurants, including one in San Jose.

In June, Duong won the gold medal at the International Beijing Culinary competition, beating 200 other chefs with a "simple" tomato consommé dish made with birds' nest, further enhancing his reputation in Vietnam.

http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_22036362/bay-area-based-khai-duong-one-americas-most

Thai Nguyen: Fashion Designer



Thai and his family immigrated to America in 1993. Thai graduated from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM) in 2002. Following graduation, he earned the title of associate

designer for BCBG Max Azria, which he held through 2004. Since then he has become the Vietnamese-American designer of choice for prominent Vietnamese entertainment production companies such as Thuy Nga (Paris by Night), Asia Entertainment, and Van Son Entertainment. Known for his convertible evening gown creations on the TV show, Thai was a finalist on Bravos Launch My Line. Thai was also a fashion designer/contributor on Ru-Pauls Drag Race Season 2 and is currently working with Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, Adrienne Maloof.

In 2008, he and his business partner, Helen Nguyen, established the showroom and storefront, Thai Nguyen Couture, in Orange County, California. The company offers Couture Bridal gowns, evening gowns, cocktail dresses, ao dai (traditional Vietnamese gowns), and a ready-to-wear line.

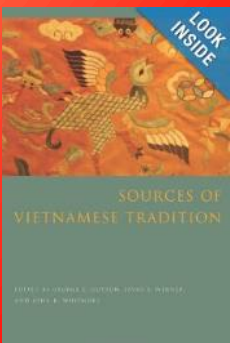
Dutton, Werner, Whitmore: Sources of Vietnamese Tradition

The anthology begins with selections that cover more than a mil-

lennium of Chinese dominance over Vietnam (111 B.C.E.--939 C.E.) and follows with texts that illuminate four centuries of independence ensured by the Ly, Tran, and Ho dynasties (1009--1407). The earlier cultivation of Buddhism and Southeast Asian political practices by the monarchy gave way to two centuries of Confucian influence and bureaucratic governance (1407--1600), based on Chinese models, and three centuries of political competition between the north and the south, resolving in the latter's favor (1600--1885). Concluding with the colonial era and the modern age, the volume recounts the ravages of war...

Available on Amazon

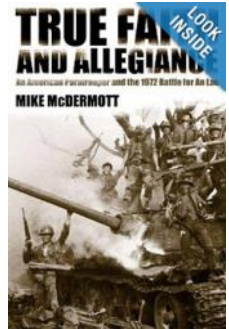
<http://www.amazon.com/Sources-Vietnamese-Tradition-Introduction-Civilizations/dp/0231138636>



Mike McDermott: True Faith and Allegiance: An American Paratrooper and the 1972 Battle for An Loc

South, swept Mike McDermott, then the senior advisor to an elite South Vietnamese paratrooper battalion, into some of the most horrific close-quarters fighting of the war. His in-the-trenches account is augmented by detailed descriptions of a user's perspective on the parachute resupply, tactical airpower, and B-52 strikes that allowed the An Loc garrison to survive.

It is an intimate and compelling account of the most brutal infantry warfare and also a critique of the mishandling of America's departure from Indochina. The battle for An Loc, a key component in the North Vietnamese attempt to overwhelm the



Available on Amazon

<http://www.amazon.com/True-Faith-Allegiance-American-Paratrooper/dp/0817317554>

Editorial...continued

southwest of Saigon sat close to the Ba Bèo communist controlled area.

A small contingent of one hundred and twenty VC was thought to protect the transmitter. Details about the surrounding terrain, which turned out to be a nightmare for attackers, were not adequately obtained prior to the attack. To reach Ấp Bắc from the southwest, the 7th Mechanized company had to cross three canals: Tân Hối, Nhỏ and Lạn Canals, the latter being the worst of the three. A battle plan designed to deal with a much weaker enemy than actually existed was rapidly drawn based on these incomplete information.

Unbeknownst to the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, the enemy committed both the Mỹ Tho main force 514th Battalion and the COSVN (1) main force 261st Battalion, in addition to local guerillas and militia members to the battle. Enemy forces had been buffed up to more than 350 combatants while the transmitter had been moved away to another location. Three companies of VC regulars were equipped with medium machine guns and 60mm mortars. (2) They were definitely gearing up for a big fight and had built strategically placed bunkers and foxholes. Both banks of the Trung Lương (Eel) Canal, which were covered with tall trees and heavy vegetations favored the defense. (3) All these factors and the way the VC fought suggested that they had the intention to lure government forces into a battle in which they held tremendous advantages. (4)

On 29 December, the 7th ARVN division was assigned to destroy the transmitter. The D-date for the operation code named "Đức Thắng 1" (Victory 1) was scheduled either for January 1st or 2nd with the expectation that a victory would be a sweet present for President Diệm, whose birthday fell on 3 January. Since it was senseless to schedule troop movements at 0400 hours on January 1st, or just four hours after the New Year celebration, the D-date was moved to 0630 on 2 January.

The VC in Ấp Tân Thới and Ấp Bắc were well aware of ARVN preparations as they witnessed the arrival of fifty truckloads of ammunition in Mỹ Tho. With additional information provided by Phạm Xuân Ân, a well connected journalist and undercover VC agent in Saigon, the VC knew of the attack plan and positioned themselves along the tree-lined creek on the western side of Ấp Tân Thới and Ấp Bắc where the brunt of the ARVN attack would be carried out. (5)

ARVN preparations for the attack began at 0400 hours on January 2, 1963 as trucks and boat engines were heard around the usually quiet hamlets of Tân Thới and Bắc forcing the VC to take their positions and the population to escape in the nearby swamps.

The plan called for a simultaneous attack by a battalion of the 7th ARVN division from the North and by two Civil Guard battalions (6) from the South. This would be combined with a cavalry attack from the southwest. The 4th Troop/2nd APC Regiment, formerly the 7th Mechanized Company (M-113) had been temporarily placed under the control of the Định Tường sector headquarters. Since its formation in April 1962, the company had achieved many victories over the communists in the Mekong Delta. The last one was on 25 September, 1962 when 9 of the 7th Mechanized Company's M113s killed 150 VC and captured 38 prisoners in the Kiến Phong Province. (7)

Thirty US CH-21 Shawnee helicopters or "Flying Bananas" due to their curved shape, were supposed to ferry the 1st Battalion/ARVN 11th Infantry Regiment to the northern end of Tân Thới by 0700 hours, although only 10 helicopters showed up because the rest had been diverted to another battlefield in the Tây Ninh Province the same day. (8) Troops were therefore delivered piecemeal forcing this unit to hold its attack at the scheduled time. The fog, which was dense that morning, caused an additional two-hour delay in troop delivery with the last unit arriving close to 1000 hours. Five UH-1 helicopter gunships, which provided protection for the CH-21 helicopters, were under order not to fire first unless fired upon.

Due to the delayed northern attack, the two Civil Guard (CG) battalions under the command of Định Tường provincial chief Major Lâm Quang Thờ moved into positions by 0635 hours, slogged through flooded rice paddies in two parallel columns and attacked the enemy by themselves from the South. Artillery support was not effective because the lush vegetation prevented the precise location of enemy positions. VC forces ambushed the first battalion (Task Force A) when the Civil Guardsmen arrived within 100 feet of their positions killing the company commander and wounding the Task Force commander. For the next two hours, two attacks that were launched against VC lines were thrown back with high casualties. The attack bogged down as Thờ failed to send the second Task Force to support the first one. He called for reinforcements from the 7th Infantry division. One of his lieutenants had asked Thờ's permission to attack the eastern side of the battlefield, but was turned down on different occasions throughout the day.

North of Tân Thới, the 11th Regiment infantrymen did not fare better. For the next five hours following the landing of the first unit, three assaults had been launched against the defensive line without success. Colonel Bùi Đình Đạm, the brand new 7th ARVN Infantry commander decided to insert additional troops either to the western or eastern sides of Ấp Bắc. He asked his U.S. adviser, Lieutenant Colonel J.P. Vann who was circling over the battlefield to look for a possible landing zone. The dense vegetation along the tree line prevented Vann to detect the well camouflaged enemy soldiers causing him to make a fatal error in judgment that led to a cascade of unfortunate results.

As he was making low passes over the southwestern battlefield area on his L-19 observation aircraft, the VC decided to hold their fire and let him fly over the area without any problem. Thinking the area was safe, Vann claimed he told the command pilot of the ten CH-21 helicopters to drop the reserve companies within 300 meters of the Ấp Bắc western tree lines in order to minimize the effectiveness of the

Editorial...continued

VC .30 caliber machine guns. (9) As command relationships between the various U.S. units were not well established during that period, American crews tended to disregard the advisors' suggestions, especially Vann, who was perceived as domineering. U.S. pilots apparently landed their helicopters within 200 meters west of Ấp Bắc where they were hit by VC machine guns and small arm fire. (10)

After dropping its load of soldiers, one CH-21 was too severely damaged to get off the ground. The infantry aboard the helicopter escaped without injury. A second CH-21 came to the rescue, but was immobilized as it touched the muddy ground. One of the Hueys returned to pick up the two grounded crews when its rotor was hit by enemy gunfire. The aircraft flipped over and crashed. A third CH-21 sustained heavy damage and was forced to land on the rice fields a short distance from the previous two. Many exposed ARVN soldiers became "shooting ducks" for the VC. (11) Because of poor coordination in the ARVN and U.S. chains of command and inability for commanders to grasp the rapid succession of events on the battlefield, they became confused, concerned, then got overly excited about the situation.

Witnessing the first two helicopters being shot down, J.P. Vann immediately called Captain James Scanlon, adviser to the 7th Mechanized Company/2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment to ask him to move the M-113s to Ấp Bắc right away in order to rescue the trapped South Vietnamese, Americans and the helicopters. The company was at that time about two kilometers west of the hamlet and had not crossed the Lạn Canal yet. Scanlon relayed the message to Captain Lý Tông Bá (he became a General in the 1970's), the commander of the company, one of the most aggressive ARVN officers; B á retorted that he would not take orders from the Americans. Scanlon continued to badger Bá to move forward and finally handed him the radio transceiver for a direct conversation with Vann:

"Bá! If you do not get your vehicles across the canal I will tell Four-Star General Lê Văn Ty to throw you in jail."

Even though he was angry, Bá wondered how Vann could make such a statement about the 7th Company, which no one had even criticized before. He told Vann,

"Lieutenant Colonel Vann! I wish you would land here so that you could see with your own eyes the difficult situation we face and the things I and my men are doing. If not, and if for some reason I am sent to prison, that will be my honor as a soldier." (12)

This was how Captain Bá later described the situation,

"This terrible stream had no bank. It was like a bone in the throat that my M-113 "iron buffaloes" just could not swallow... I suggested to the Advisory Team and to the Operation Headquarters that they should order the nearest friendly unit to march on foot to the helicopter crash site...we could not get a vehicle across because the canal was simply a bottomless pool of mud. Because they did not understand this particular factor, the American advisors misunderstood my actions. They thought I was irresponsible, that I did not want to fight..." (13)

While the exchange of words was going on, artillery pummeled VC defensive lines, although it was again ineffective in the presence of dense vegetation. Vann flying at low altitude in his reconnaissance plane directed the strikes. For such a daring feat, he later received the Distinguished Flying Cross. (14)

Out of fear of being blamed for the battlefield incidents, Vann shifted the blame to the 7th Mechanized Company by accusing it of having moved too slowly. As for Captain Scanlon, the adviser assigned to the M-113 company, according to Ba, he did not understand the situation and did not report to Vann the difficult terrain encountered by the company. When the latter began engaging the enemy and three crewmen of the command vehicle became wounded, Scanlon threw open the rear doors of the command vehicle, ran away to escape and did not return to the company until the next morning, 3 January 1963. (15)

The South Vietnamese M-113s had no problem crossing streams and rivers in the past, but the 10-ton M113 had difficulty crossing the Ba Kỳ Canal (Lạn Canal for the locals) with its bottomless muddy flow. Crews and infantry had to cut brush and trees to fill the canal until it was shallow enough for the M-113s to cross. (16) Attempt to obtain proper authorization to advance caused further delay. Because of lack of uniform command, Bá had to clear orders with his immediate supervisor, Major Thở and then the 7th Infantry division commander, Colonel Đạm.

A fourth CH-21 attempted to rescue the downed helicopter crews, although it too was hit by VC ground fire forcing it to land in the mud. Overall, five U.S. helicopters were downed or destroyed over a short period in this one-day battle.

By 1330 hours, Bá's M-113s had crossed the Lạn Canal and headed toward the enemy's defensive line in a single file as the Americans had taught the Vietnamese. The many impressive victories of the M-113s in the past had sowed fear into the hearts of the VC who called them the "green dragons." The VC did not plan to face them that day either; however, they had the choice of fighting back by holding on to their positions or retreating in broad daylight through muddy and open fields, which meant certain death. Having neutralized the northern and southern attacks, VC Colonel Hải Hoàng decided to put up the fight and concentrate his troops on the incoming green dragons. The South Vietnamese gun crews who were exposed from the waist up in their gun turrets became easy targets for snipers; at that time the metallic shields that would protect the gunners were not installed yet. This was a major defect in the design of the American vehicles, which would be corrected only later. Overall 14 Vietnamese crewmen were killed by enemy fire by the end of the day. (17)

Bá in the meantime was knocked unconscious by the gun handlebar for at least fifteen minutes inside his carrier. When he recovered from his concussion, his unit continued to launch an attack on the holed up VC who in turn tossed grenades at the carriers. An M-113 equipped with a flamethrower was sent to within 100 meters of the VC formation. When the device was fired, the flame died only at 30 meters because the crew had mixed an incorrect amount of jelly agent with the gasoline. (18) The intense fighting continued until Bá's M-113s conquered the target, Ấp Bắc at 1630 hours. (19)

Vann then flew to Tân Hiệp to ask General Cao--who at that time decided to take over the command of the operation--to deploy an airborne battalion on the eastern side of Ấp Bắc to trap the VC inside the hamlet. Cao, however, decided to drop his airborne troops on the western side of Ấp Bắc behind the M-113 formation. He argued that he had lost confidence in the abrasive Vann because the latter had

Editorial...continued

made many mistakes, berated his counterparts in front of others, and placed the lives of many South Vietnamese in danger to save a handful of Americans. (20)

Three hundred paratroopers, the elite of the ARVN, scheduled to be dropped at 1600 hours arrived at the scene only at 1800 hours. To avoid ground fire, the C-123 pilots changed course and without correction from either the jumpmaster or the lead pilot caused the jumping paratroopers to land right in front of the entrenched VC who picked them off easily. Some paratroopers got stuck in trees while others landed in the open rice paddies where they became targets for the VC. Despite adversity, the airborne battalion continued their fight until sundown. By the end of the day, 19 had died in action and 33 were wounded.

By 2200 hours, the VC began their escape taking with them dead and wounded and heading east toward the Plain of Reeds, which was left unguarded. Their escape was facilitated by darkness as Cao refused to approve the use of flares fearing it could expose the airborne battalion's night defensive positions. (21)

Eighty ARVN soldiers were reported killed and one hundred and nine wounded. The Americans reported three dead and six wounded. An estimate one hundred VC had been killed.

Discussion

1. On 3 January--one day after the battle ended--a team of journalists, including Sheehan, Halberstam tipped by Phạm Xuân Ẩn, took a cab to Ấp Bắc and toured the hamlet with the American advisors who were still angry at the ARVN commanders for missing an opportunity to score a victory. Vann who had made major decisions during the battle gave a distorted version of the events to cover his shortcomings. He blasted the South Vietnamese, "It was a miserable damn performance, just like it always is. These people don't listen. They make the same mistake over and over again in the same way." (22) He added that the ARVN's inaction had its roots in the defective Diệm government. Halberstam, based on these comments, wrote in the New York Times, "The advisers feel that there is too much political interference in the Vietnamese army and that promotion too often depends on political loyalty rather than military ability." (23) The journalists went on to criticize U.S. policies in Southeast Asia and what they called the "dictatorial" and "erroneous" policies of President Ngô Đình Diệm. (24)

Vann, however, did not mention that: 1, based on previous similar encounters, the American advisers had expected that the VC would flee upon seeing the M-113s and would not oppose stiff resistance; 2, the Americans had landed the ARVN company too close to the VC defensive line based on Vann's faulty assessments; 3, Vann had chosen a most inauspicious area (flooded paddy) on the western aspect of the battlefield to launch an assault on the VC; 4, defective designs led to the death of M-113 machine gunners and stalled the attack; 5, the communists were well prepared and had enormous defensive advantages; 6, the Vietnamese cavalry had been following procedures learned from the Americans when it attacked Ấp Bắc in small units.

Worse, in his after-action report Vann blamed an American pilot for landing too close to the enemy line causing the helicopter to be shot down. He then told the above reporters a different tale: the loss of the helicopters was "virtually inevitable" because the enemy was well-armed, well-trained and was everywhere. A few days later, he told Richard Tregaskis that he himself had made the decision to put the helicopters close to the tree line, the most costly mistake anyone made during the battle. (25)

Vann, although a competent military commander, is also described as abrasive, arrogant, stubborn, and emotional. His tendency toward emotional outbursts and demanding style may have soured his relationship not only with some ARVN officers, but also with U.S. pilots. Vann is a "combination of impatience, arrogance, and boundless courage." (26)

Captain Bá later remarked,

"John P. Vann was too enthusiastic and too concerned about the fate of the U.S. personnel and the number of helicopters lost, so he lost his cool and slandered both the Army of South Vietnam and me personally because I was involved in this battle. On several subsequent occasions when he saw me, in Binh Duong Province in 1968 and in II Corps in 1972, Vann apologized to me and asked me to forgive him. That is the truth." (27)

General Huỳnh Văn Cao, commander of the IV Corps in his autobiography, argued that the operation had failed because the 7th Infantry Division's operation plan did not suit the muddy terrain and did not focus its primary effort on the objective. (28)

General Paul D. Harkins, first commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) considered the operation a success based on World War II's U.S. military doctrine because the hamlets had been captured by the ARVN. Harkins, an imposing figure, was not considered in the Army to be "an intellectual giant." (29) A purely conventional warrior who had fought under Patton in World War II, he was brought up in the traditional army "can do" spirit of professional optimism, even at the expense of reality. (30) He believed in U.S. firepower and failed to switch his World War II mentality to adapt himself and his staff to an unconventional war despite Sir Robert Thompson's advice to the contrary. Thompson, a British expert in counterinsurgency in Malaya had suggested that fire power and military solutions would be counterproductive to political problems. (31)

Harkins' optimism by not trying to solve the shortcomings of ARVN and CG troops/system ultimately affected the performance of the South Vietnamese military and the American advisers attached to them. (32) It also led to misconceptions in Washington and later policy failure. "Misled by the unsubstantiated assertions of progress on the military front made by Harkins, McNamara and Taylor upon their return to Washington gave a monumental misreading of the Vietnamese situation to the National Security Council on 2 October 1963." (33)

2. In early 1963 and especially in this battle, the chain of command was not well established leaving room for many people to jump in and make last minute decisions that adversely affected the outcome of the battle. Major Thơ who commanded the Civil Guardsmen and the 2nd Armored Regiment was not under the command authority of Colonel Đạm. As a province chief, he reported directly to the Minis-

Editorial...continued

ter of Defense, a civilian while Colonel Đạm reported to the ARVN Joint General Chief of Staff.

Without a clear chain of command, coordination between the various units, Vietnamese and American was obviously lacking. Lieutenant Colonel Vann thought he was the commander-in-chief of the battlefield while in fact he was only the adviser of the 7th ARVN division. As an adviser, according to a memorandum issued by General Lê Văn Ty, Vann did not have any command or supervisory capacity. (34). Even U.S. pilots would not listen to him because of his abrasive character; besides, this was the first large helicopter assault in the Vietnam War. (35) And of course, these same pilots would not listen to Vietnamese commanders. Captain Lý Tông Bá who worked under Major Thở was correct not to obey Vann's orders.

Officials who had command authority included: General Huỳnh Văn Cao, the IV Corps commander; Colonel Daniel Porter, the Corps adviser; Colonel Bùi Đình Đạm, the commander of the 7th Infantry Division, whose units were on the field; Lieutenant Colonel Vann, the division adviser; Major Lâm Quang Thở who was Định Tường Province chief and commander of the CG forces and the 2nd Armored Regiment.

When General Cao was promoted from commander of the 7th ARVN division to IV Corps commander, he suggested that his chief of Staff, Colonel Đạm replaced him. Although a good staff officer, Đạm held some reservation about his own ability to command. (Kilbride 88, Toczek 71) Halberstam then wrote that one contemporary characterized Đạm as "a nice little man and good staff officer, but [he] did not want responsibility... [He was] terrified of battle, helicopters, and Cao." (36) No other party had stepped up to concur with that statement. Sheehan then speculated that Đạm was promoted as division commander because of political loyalty and he would not present any threat to Cao. (37) From these innuendos and unconfirmed statements, Sheehan and Halberstam built a full proof case that there was too much political interference in the army and that promotion was based on loyalty rather than ability. (38) To extrapolate what happened at the 7th Infantry division to the whole ARVN was a gross overgeneralization of the fact during this state building period.

3. President Diệm who had the unenviable task of building a state in South Vietnam and an army--the ARVN--at the same time from scratch during a time of war obviously had a big interest in the ARVN 7th Infantry Division, which headquartered in Mỹ Tho, IV Corps, protected the Mekong Delta. Diệm depended on the ARVN for his survival just as the ARVN depended on the government of Vietnam for its existence. It seems strange that Saigon was berated for relying on a coterie of loyal officers while nothing was said about HỒ who similarly relied on a group of loyal communists for his survival in the North. Until today almost forty years after the end of the war, those who are not members of the Communist Party are excluded from power and official functions, relegated to the fringes, or simply land in jails.

Being close to Saigon (40 miles southwest of Saigon), the 7th division staff thus received close scrutiny from Diệm who needed its support, especially after the 1960 military coup. In early 1962, its commander, Colonel Huỳnh Văn Cao had good success in pacifying the area under his control. However, Diệm, a conservative and hands-on man, did not want the army to sustain high casualties. When a VC attack on an ARVN convoy caused some casualties, Cao was called to Saigon and reprimanded by Diệm. From that time onward, Cao became less productive as a military fighter. (39)

In 1962, Diệm decided to split up the III Corps into two with the former III Corps reduced to covering northeast Saigon and the IV Corps protecting the west and southwest of South Vietnam. Cao who became general and commander of the newly formed IV Corps promoted his Chief of Staff, Colonel Bùi Đình Đạm to commander of the 7th division.

The U.S. since 1954 decided to help Vietnam build an army. However, building an army does not simply mean equipping it, but "build[ing] or chang[ing] the society from which it comes in order to meet the demands of fielding a modern military." (40) It means taking peasants, villagers out of their ancestral homes and plugging them into the military so that their allegiance from their families, villages could be switched to the state. The role of building the army was left to Diệm, who was too busy building the state to worry about building an army at the same time. But Diệm who was neither a military person nor had any military experience, did not have the service of a General Giáp to lead his army and transform the mentality of the military. The failure of the Diệm's state building ultimately could be traced to the lack of an experienced and strong Army Chief of Staff who was willing and committed to mold the ARVN into a modern army.

What was a small regimental-sized battle among the many battles that were waged yearly in South Vietnam became a major event for the leftist U.S. press, which used it to criticize the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments. It claimed the ARVN was incompetent and not strong enough to stand up against the North Vietnamese Army. It completely ignored the many battles that the 7th Mechanized company had won against the communists, including the one in September 1962. It failed to report the victory Captain Bá won against the VC a few months later at Ấp Bắc II.

In sum, the battle of Ấp Bắc's overall importance is mixed. Some advisors, the press and the VC called the battle a significant event. General Harkins, Admiral Felt, and Ambassador Nolting, on the other hand thought it was just an ordinary battle. (41). It only became important because Vann and the leftist press felt it that way.

Moyar summarized it best when he wrote, "The South Vietnamese did not perform well at Ấp Bắc, but neither did they display gross ineptitude or cowardice...Vann committed the most grievous error of the battle by landing the reserve company too close to the western edge of the Việt Cộng's defensive positions...Vann succeeded in misleading the American press corps, and hence the world by exaggerating the faults of the South Vietnamese and hiding his own." (42)

Editorial...continued

NOTES

1. COSVN or Central Office for South Vietnam: imagined headquarters of the communist forces in South Vietnam; its existence, physical location, and importance are contentious subjects.
2. Ha Mai Viet. *Steel and Blood. South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia*. Annapolis, Naval Institute Press. 2008, 362, note 19.
3. Ibid, 10.
4. Moyar, Mark. *Triumph Forsaken. The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. New York, Cambridge University Press. 2006, 187.
5. Berman, Larry. *Perfect Spy. The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An*. New York, Collins; 2007, 134-143
6. The Bảo An or Civil Guards were para-military organizations who were coalesced together and converted into the Regional Forces in 1964.
7. Ha Mai Viet, 11.
8. More than sixty US and VNAF participated in the battle of Tây Ninh in War Zone C.
9. Moyar, 188.
10. Vinh Truong. *Vietnam War. The New Legion*, Vol. 1. Victoria, Canada, Trafford. 2010, 361.
11. Moyar, 189.
12. Ly Tong Ba. The Battle of Ap Bac. Myth and Reality. <http://baovecovang2012.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/tran-ap-bac-thuc-te-va-huyen-thoi-chuan-tuong-ly-tong-ba/>
13. Ha Mai Viet, 13.
14. Moyar, 190.
15. Ha Mai Viet, 15.
16. Truong 377
17. Moyar 191
18. Vinh Truong, 407.
19. Ly Tong Ba. *Hoi Ky 25 Nam Khoi Lua* (Memoir of 25 Years of Warfare). Westminster, CA. 2001, 5th Edition, 65, 75. In Bá's drawing, Tan Thoi was placed south of Ap Bac, which is not correct.
20. Moyar, 193.
21. Ibid, 194.
22. Halberstam, David. *The Making of a Quagmire*. New York, Random House. 1965, 154; Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Light: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York, Random House. 1988, 277
23. *NY Times*, January 11, 1963.
24. Ha Mai Viet, 16.
25. Moyar, 194-196.
26. Kilbride, Kevin. *Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam (1954-1963): The Battle of Ap Bac*. Thesis presentation, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2012. <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA563005>, 91-92; Halberstam, 163-165.
27. Ha Mai Viet, 17.
28. Huynh Van Cao. *One Life*, 18 in Ha Ma Viet, 16.
29. Palmer, Bruce. *The 25 Year-War. America's Military Role in Vietnam*. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky. 1984, 11.
30. Nagl, John A. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife. Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 2002, 132-133.
31. Ibid, 130.
32. Ibid, 134-135.
33. Palmer, 12.
34. Cao Van Vien. *U.S. Adviser*. Indochina Monographs. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980, 33. According to the memorandum, (1) the adviser assists and advise ARVN commanders on "strictly technical aspects"; (2) the adviser has no command nor supervisory capacity; (3) the ARVN commanders should exercise their own judgments in making use of the advice offered.
35. Ha Mai Viet, 363-364, note 18.
36. Halberstam, 146.
37. Sheehan, 209.
38. *NY Times*, January 11, 1963.
39. Moyar, 176.
40. Kilbride, 113.
41. Toczek, David. *The Battle of Ap Bac Vietnam. They Did Everything but Learn From It*. Annapolis, Naval Institute Press. 2001, 156.
42. Moyar, 205.