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AMERICAN MARINES AND PACIFICATION HEADACHES

FIVE MOUNTAIN VILLAGES, SOUTH VIETNAM--Last fall, the battle cry of the American Marines was "We'll be in Hoi An by New Year's '66." Today, they estimate it will be New Year's '68./

The hold-up in reaching Hoi An, a provincial capital situated only 15 miles south of the strategic airbase of Danang, illustrates the changing concepts of how American troops are to be employed in Vietnam--and some of the many problems they face.

"We could easily have fought our way to Hoi An," one Marine explained. "But then, we would have had to fought our way back. The essential problem of this war is not moving your frontlines forward--but is keeping your rear covered."

This problem of "keeping your rear covered" is usually identified as that "twilight area" of pacification, which ties together the military, political, social and economic aspects of the war to control and gain the support of the local population. Without control and support of the ^{V. VIETNAMESE} rural population, officials here believe the war could continue for years.

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The decision to halt the advance of the Marine frontline positions until the Vietnamese cadre could pacify the population brought vocal dissents within the Marine Corps ranks and sneers from Army colonels who claimed "the Marines are afraid to go out and find the Viet Cong." Under the direction of Marine commander Maj. Gen. Lewis Walt, and backed by key Army generals in Saigon, however, the Marine effort ~~outside~~^{are} outside of Danang slowly began to dovetail with the activities of the Vietnamese government to control the population.

"In a conventional war, progress is measured by an advancing frontline," one reliable source explained. "But in this war our outlying positions ^{are} constant and progress must be measured in the third dimension. We must go in depth down into the population to dig out the Viet Cong infrastructure and then re-building the local anti-Communist government."

The result of this coordinated Marine-Vietnamese effort is the "Five Mountain Villages Campaign" initiated less than ten miles southwest of Danang, ~~between~~ and 15 miles from Ha Hoi An. This campaign has been tabbed the No. 1 priority project in the country; it is the foremost attempt in pacification and a pilot case for future decision-making in Vietnam.

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Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was briefed in depth on the project during his last visit.

"If this plan doesn't succeed here, it's not going to succeed anywhere else in the country," one reliable source explained. "We'll really be in serious trouble then."

The project has already run into some serious trouble.

"Now we're just spinning our wheels," one source explained.

The "Five Mountain Villages" campaign calls for the pacification of five villages (subdivided into 19 villages), covering a twenty square kilometer area. The five-village complex ^{Hamlet} ~~comprises~~ ^{contains} 42,000 population--~~of which~~ about seven percent of the families are considered to be related to the Viet Cong Communists. The villages, densely populated villages, ^{are} ~~is~~ surrounded by the ~~peaks~~ ^{five} five peaks of mountains containing grey and salmon-colored marble. (These Marble Mountains would make a great tourist attraction, but you'd be killed going out there," one Marine cracked.).

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The plan calls for three components for pacification--the American Marines who secure the outer perimeter of the area by myriads of patrols to prevent the invasion of hard-core Communist units, the Vietnamese paramilitary troops who secure the x villages, and the Vietnamese civilian cadre who through distribution of economic goods, psychological warfare, census-taking and organizing the people attempt to weed out the Viet Cong infrastructure and convince the villagers to side with the anti-Communist government forces.

"The role of the American Marines is ~~substantive~~ like an egg," one reliable source explained. "Our frontlines on the rim of the area is the shell--but like a shell, the lines can be broken. The vital installation--the Danang airbase--is the yolk yolk yolk and we also defend that. The white is what we are trying to pacify and then solidify."

On October 18, the Vietnamese government, ~~with Marines on~~
~~the~~, began their pacification in the rear by using on headquarters company and ~~only~~ four understrength line companies of the 59th Regional Forces Battalion to sweep through the area. Then 327 civilian cadre were moved in from the provincial headquarters and the Vietnamese commander put them through a detailed two-week re-training course. Then the commander received five Vietnamese ~~Pebe~~ People's Action Teams (PAT's), totalling 50 persons, who were responsible for census taking and other activities.

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In each of the five villages, the Vietnamese commander placed and Regional Forces company and one People's Action Team; in each of the 19 hamlets, he placed a civilian cadre team.

"But during the third week of the campaign, a 50-man Viet Cong platoon broke through the Marine blocking position and were in our area shooting things us up and they hit us hard," one reliable source explained. "Five regional force troopers and several cadremen were killed. Since each of our armed companies was 42 per cent understrength, we had 15-man platoons in when we should have had 35 men. And fighting against 50 Viet Cong, of course, we lose against those odds. Until that we were just beginning to get the confidence of the people--but after that, the people clammed up and wouldn't tell us anything. And it also hurt the morale of our cadre. One whole 11-man team took off--but the district chief talked them into coming back.

Then four nights later, the same Viet Cong platoon hit us again. They slipped in between two Marine patrols, attacked the Regional Force headquarters unit of 17 men, killed several civilian cadre and kidnapped two of the women working with the drama unit. We haven't seen the women since. One of the American Marines saw the whole action from 50 yards away--but he couldn't open up with his machinegun. He would have killed more friendlies than enemy.

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"Of course, the Marines can't stop all small-unit infiltration. It would take Marines shoulder-to-shoulder to do that. And once you had that, the Viet Cong would mortar them ~~a~~ from across the river, which they've already started doing."

Since these late November actions, the Vietnamese have slightly reinforced the area with troop strength and the Marines have moved in more units; now the Marines are not only holding the outer perimeter by extensive patrolling, but they are also responsible for securing the civilian cadre in 11 of the 19 villages, ^{with} while the Vietnamese troops defending the remaining 8.

By mid-December, "we started ~~pac~~ pacifying again and things were moving slow, but good." ^{The Source Continued.} The people started giving us good intelligence and were turning in some Viet Cong. For the first time, on a Sunday afternoon families from Danang would come to the villages here to visit their relatives; more than 100 families moved back into the area--but ~~none~~ of none of the people were of draft age."

During late December, however, the Viet Cong launched ~~an~~ one night four harassing actions, including mortaring the central command post and ~~announcing~~ attacking another People's Action Team, killing several of them.

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/r ~~Gradually~~ Gradually, through the operation, the number of civilian cadresmen dropped from 331 to 304; one serious disadvantage of them is they were considered by reliable sources to be poorly trained for the work and secondly none of them were residents of the villages being pacified, which is considered to be an essential prerequisite point.

Problems also arose about the 10-man People's Action Teams, which are equipped, trained and paid for political activities and intelligence gathering by a subdivision of the American Central Intelligence Agency. The Vietnamese commander wanted to use the teams for providing security since they had better guns than his military troops; the teams didn't want to provide security. One of the five teams defected en masse and the province chief transferred a second team which caused problems.

"But the biggest headache is that we can't move our Vietnamese troops and cadre out of this 20 square kilometer chunk of villages until we have villagers here who can defend the Five Mountain Village area. And there's not one young man here between 10 and 38 we can recruit. We have lost the middle generation. No one has yet begun to find the answer to that problem."

There are eighty square kilometers of land to be pacified before reaching Hoi An. And that's why the present official estimate is Hoi An will be reached by New Year's, 1968.