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Feb. 17, 1965

LITTLE THINGS IN A BIGGER WAR

SAIGON—"We always goof up the littlest, little things," one American advisor in the Mekong delta province explained. "And it's these little things that will make the difference in this war. If we lose, it won't be because the Viet Cong are so good--it's because our side is so bad."

The lack of fetishily meticulous control--because of American bureaucracy and the Vietnamese inefficiency and corruption--that is a contributing factor to the problem of security, which is one of the most important problems in this country experiencing a guerrilla war.

While Americans here openly ridicule the Vietnamese for their flagrant corruption, it is the Americans who find it easier to go along with it rather than to attempt to correct it. ~~In some cases,~~
~~the Americans--civilian and military--are part of the game.~~

For example, foreign economic experts are openly shocked at the indirect way in which U. S. military and economic funds and goods contribute to the Viet Cong Communist guerrilla strength.

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"All the aircraft gasoline for the big American heliopter base at Soc Trang is taxed twice by Viet Cong roadblocks," he explained. "Then it is piped into American helicopters to kill Viet Cong. It does not make sense. It might have been excused in 1959 or 1962 at the beginning of American involvement, but in 1965 it is a sign of weakness."

Soc Trang, 100 miles southwest of Saigon, has been mortared at least three times, including once immediately following the recent bombing raids on North Viet Nam. The aircraft fuel is purchased from petroleum companies which sublet the trucking of the gasoline to Vietnamese contracting companies, which in turn pay off the Viet Cong to get through their roadblocks, according to petroleum company officials.

In another case, American military officials contracted to Vietnamese construction companies the building of American hui billets and compounds in the provinces, especially in 1962-63. But in order to cut the trees for the lumber, these Vietnamese contracting firms paid Viet Cong taxes--and this cost was js hiked onto the price of the U. S. government. Indirectly, ~~xxxx~~ the U. S. government paid taxes to the Viet Cong.

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In ~~many~~ cases, Viet Cong construction workers built the American compounds--in other cases Viet Cong sympathizers later came in to repair fixtures or re-paint the buildings. In short, The Viet Cong have access to the interior drawings of almost every American compound. Following the Tonkin Gulf bombing of North Viet Nam in August when American policymakers moved a squadron of B-57 jet-fighters to Bien Hoa, the ~~Viet Cong~~ government security agents soon afterwards captured a Viet Cong sergeant who had sent to his higher headquarters the complete drawing of the Bien Hoa airbase. ~~Only~~ He told Vietnamese security officials that the Viet Cong were planning an attack on the airbase--and on November 1 it happened.

But while such circumstances may be excusable, there was in one particular instance ~~x~~ only several weeks ago in which a young Vietnamese peddler girl on the mainstreet of Saigon attempted to sell to this correspondent an American-made blueprint of an American compound in Nha Trang, 200 miles north of Saigon.

There is, therefore, a laxity in the control of ^{PLANS} ~~information~~ and materia l from the Americans to the Vietnamese government authorities, which allows the Viet Cong to buy on the open market whatever they need. ~~One~~
~~x~~ Another example, is that under the U. S. economic aid program quantities of suntan lotion have been sent ~~ot~~ to South Viet Nam.

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While this may seem like a harmless item, reliable sources indicate that Viet Cong guerrillas have ~~acquired~~ regularly purchase large quantities of it from the Long Dien open market (a market in Viet Cong control 30 miles southeast of Saigon in Phuoc Tuy province). They use it for treating ~~na~~ palm burns. In another case, fertilizer from the U. S. aid program is captured by the Viet Cong and used to make ~~100~~ order explosives.

Another example is the fatigue and camouflage uniform materia l ~~in~~ and service i ensignia of American and Vietnamese servicemen. On the main street of Catimat--shops sell American captain's and major's insignia, sell the fatigue uniform hats shepped like baseball caps with American insignia on it; American shopkeepers servicemen regularly buy their boots ~~and~~ from local shopkeepers-- which could easily be copied by the Viet Cong or Eurasian or Caucasian Communists. ~~Whereas~~ the black and green fatigue camouflage uniforms of the U. S. and Vietnamese marines ~~are~~ can be purchased ~~from~~ from ordinary shops in Thu Duc, the suburb of Saigon.

American servicemen have lost through the years ~~hundreds~~ of their U. S. government identification cards "when sleeping in an unknow n hotel with an unknown woman," according to U. S. military sources. They lose an average of at least one a night--sometimes more--and U. S. authorities are hoping they are not ~~used~~ sent to Europe to infiltrate onto American bases there. In short, the Viet Cong have ~~all~~ the means available to them on ~~the~~ open market to outfit themselves exactly like a Vietnamese government or a ~~an~~ American soldier.

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In addition to these means, the Viet Cong have also captured hundreds of Vietnamese government green fatigues--they once captured more than 500 of them in a truck only 20 miles outside of Saigon. It now appears only a question of time before they overrun government installations by appearing to be Vietnamese government troops--they have repeatedly done this at the village level.

In the sabotage attack on Pleiku, American GI's were Viet Cong suicide squads threw explosive charges at American GI's explosive charges plunked into an American beer can. It is a seemingly unimportant detail--but one learned two years ago by the U. S. Marine helicopter unit that American beer, soda cans and coke bottles had be destroyed or else the Viet Cong would salvage them and use them as container for boobytraps and explosives. Yet, two years later, in another part of the country, American GI's were unaware of the importance of destroying these items. Similarly, when American and Vietnamese GI's practice shooting on rifle ranges, young Vietnamese children scurry around and pick up the brass--which is promptly turned over the Viet Cong, who can melt it down for their own purposes.

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One extraordinary example of the lack of detailed attention to security matters was revealed in the ~~most~~ isolated outpost of Ashau siaute situated in the northernmost provinces on the Laotian border-- in fact some maps show that the airstrip there is in Laos. Last the plane carrying summer American Military Commander General William C. Westmoreland was shot at and hit ~~at~~ more than six times as it lumbered down the runway and turned around for takeoff. ~~According to the~~ American Special Forces Captain in charge of the camp explained to this correspondent that the Viet Cong ~~had~~ had literally walked through the American minefield, hid in the high elephant grass and boldly peppered the general's airplane. The captain said the general was understandably disturbed about this--and ordered all the elephant grass, some of it ten feet high, to be cut/.

But, he later explained, while the Viet Cong knew where his minefields were situated--he did not. For the mines had been laid by Vietnamese, Americans and aborigines during two previous years and then they had moved to other camps, the location of the camp itself had been slightly changed--and the maps showing the American minefields no longer revealed to him the position of the mines.

Finally, a mining expert in mines was flown out from the corps headquarters--to determine the location of the mines--and then days were spent ~~in~~ cutting the ~~grass~~ elephant grass.

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It is ~~also~~ often heard in Viet Nam that one of the key problems of * security and of winning the war is that of intelligence—who are the Viet Cong, where are they concentrated and what are they doing. It is openly acknowledged by ~~at~~ Vietnamese military officials that the Viet Cong have agents ~~at~~ in the highest levels of the military, the ~~police and the government~~ some levels of the police and the government. Some Vietnamese security officials also believe that they have penetrated into the American military command headquarters. Their argument is that the Vietnamese working in the American command—Vietnamese secretaries, office boys and janitors—have been cleared by Vietnamese ~~pero~~ personnel and security forces who give the proper jobs and security ~~clearance~~ clearances on the basis of money—and not on the basis of anti-Communist political leanings. For the price of four months salary, these security officials maintain, any Vietnamese can get ~~on~~ a job in the American command (the price has risen, however—once the price was a months salary). Hence when explosives last month blew up one passageway in the American headquarters building, Vietnamese security officials had little sympathy for the plight of the Americans staff officers inside.

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Another example fringing on security and intelligence-gathering is the suspected Viet Cong penetration of bars and cafes ~~was~~ used nightly by American GI's. It was an effective tactic that the Communists used ~~in~~ for the gathering of intelligence by against the French during the French Indo-China War a decade ago—in some cases the mistress of a French officer for years simply ~~kill~~ stabbed or killed him at the proper moment. Vietnamese security officials report that ~~within~~ within the past six months, the Viet Cong have established a ring of 40 girls in the Chinese twin-city of Saigon called Cholon—and these girls are trained to be "girl-friends" of American servicemen. The most lavish and expensive night club in Saigon, ~~is~~ is considered part of the French espionage network (which has contacts with the Viet Cong)—and above the nightclub is one of the most ~~soph~~ sophisticated brothels in town. In the northern city of Danang, the Vietnamese corps commander received so many complaints about the American-frequented bars, he closed ~~down~~ down 9 on mainstreet—but 33 were left open. However, perhaps the most striking example of the mid- mis-directed bureaucracy, of the lack of control over small but significant detail was witnessed by this correspondent who was immediately on-the-spot following the Bien Hoa mortar attack on November first and the Pleiku mortar-sabotage attack last week. The ~~striking~~ striking example was not that American GI's were killed by American ammunition and suspected American mortars—or that Vietnamese sentries had not been patrolling actively enough. It was the fact that a Viet Cong mortar attack could have been rendered less lethal by a more practical and substantial roof on American billets.

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In early 1962, American engineers drafted the construction of ~~in~~ for use throughout the country of low-slung metal-like buildings for American advisory teams and helicopter and aircraft crews. All of these had frail roofs made of an half-inch thick asbestos material which has both the appearance and consistency of papier-mache.

In both the Bien Hoa and the Pleiku mortar attacks, the mortar rounds--because of their high trajectory--plunked directly through the insubstantial roofs and exploded on impact with the floor. Some of the first rounds--through fragmentation or concussion--killed or wounded American GI's before they ever got out of bed.

These frail roofs--with a shallow slope--are in contrast both to those used by French a decade ago and those currently being constructed by the British and Malaysians in the wilds of Borneo. During the French Indo-China War, the roofs of French billets in general were made of steel--which caused the mortars to explode on impact with the roof instead of on the floor--and were of a very steep slope, like that of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. This steep slope caused many of the mortar rounds to slide down to the ground and explode outside the billet.

The British in Borneo are also reportedly building meticulously elaborate roofs on their jungle camps in ~~the~~ along the Borneo-Indonesian border.

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These roofs are reportedly built with one layer of steel roofing material topped by a layer of ~~sand~~ bags of sand, a second layer of roofing material and a second layer of sandbags, which is strong enough to ~~cause~~ cause the mortar round to explode on the rooftop rather than on the floor of the billet.