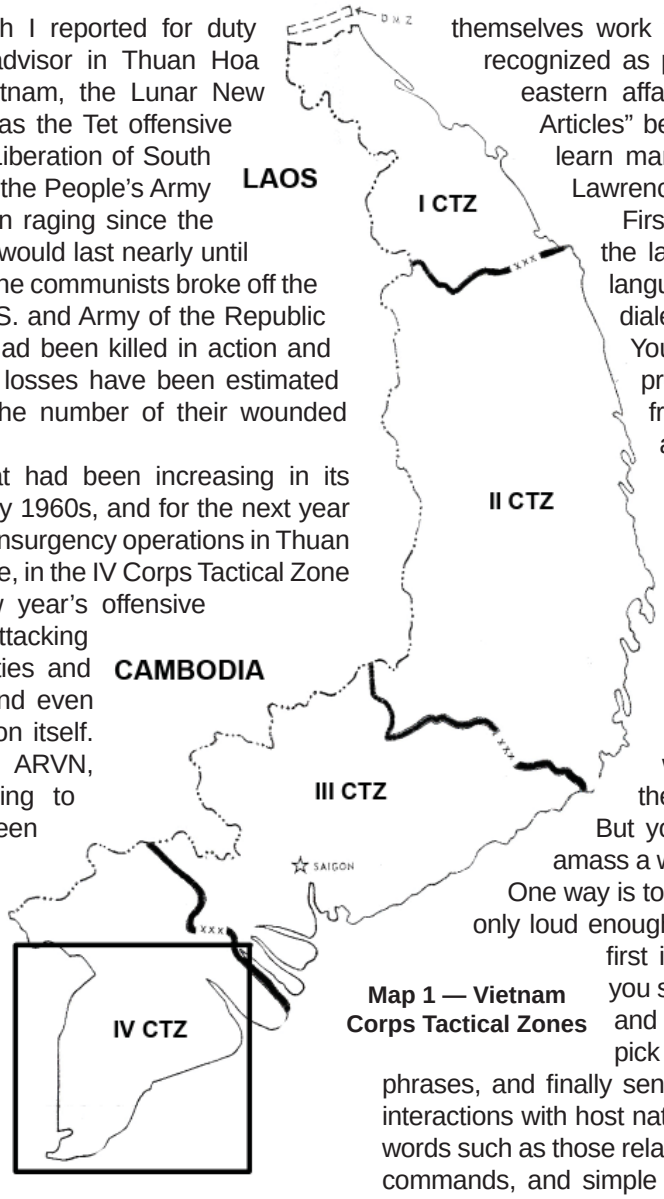
MEKONG DELTA 1968:
COUNTERINSURGENCY THEN AND NOW

RUSSELL A. ENO

In June 1968, the month I reported for duty as a district assistant advisor in Thuan Hoa District, Republic of Vietnam, the Lunar New Year — generally referred to as the Tet offensive by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (Vietcong or VC) and the People's Army of Vietnam (NVA) — had been raging since the end of January. The offensive would last nearly until the end of September. Before the communists broke off the offensive, more than 4,300 U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Soldiers had been killed in action and 16,000 wounded. Communist losses have been estimated at more than 85,000 killed; the number of their wounded remains unknown.

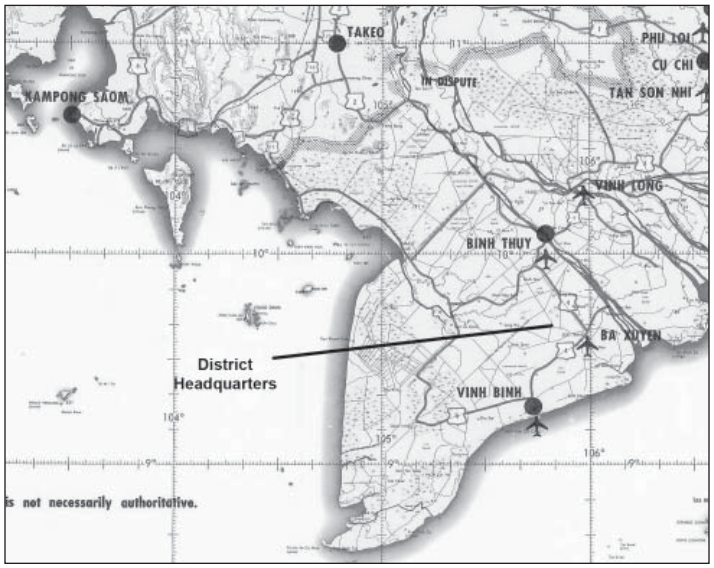
I arrived during a war that had been increasing in its intensity since at least the early 1960s, and for the next year my focus was to be on counterinsurgency operations in Thuan Hoa District, Ba Xuyen Province, in the IV Corps Tactical Zone (see Map 1). This lunar new year's offensive saw VC and NVA soldiers attacking in force in more than 100 cities and towns, in province capitols, and even in the nation's capitol of Saigon itself. They were opposed by U.S., ARVN, and other allied forces. Trying to draw specific parallels between our experience in Vietnam and recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan can be risky, but I want to share some thoughts on counterinsurgency as I saw it and touch on some of the considerations that are as relevant to Arab cultures today as they were in the Mekong Delta four decades ago. The geography may have changed, but the fundamentals of counterinsurgency have not, and some of our allies' tactics, techniques, and procedures were first outlined in a piece entitled "Twenty-Seven Articles" for *The Arab Bulletin* of 20 August 1917. T.E. Lawrence served as a British army officer who worked with and advised — although the word learned is perhaps a better description — Bedouin irregulars during World War I against Ottoman Turk and German forces in the Hejaz, a 250-kilometer (150-mile) wide strip of present-day Saudi Arabia bordering the Red Sea. His straightforward recommendations were intended for the eyes of British officers who would later themselves work with Arab armies, whom Lawrence recognized as potentially valuable allies in middle-eastern affairs. I had not read "Twenty-Seven Articles" before arriving in Vietnam and had to learn many of his lessons firsthand, as had Lawrence.



Map 1 — Vietnam Corps Tactical Zones

First and foremost, learn as much of the language — and as much about the language — as you can, and in the local dialect. Listen more than you speak. You may not soon develop a native proficiency, but do not let that stop you from trying. As you build vocabulary and learn the rules of grammar, you will be dismayed at how much you don't know, but keep going; this anxiety is normal and provides a standard against which to measure your progress. Remember, at first your passive vocabulary and understanding will always exceed your active use of the language. Simply put, you will understand what people are saying, although at the time you may not be able to say it. But you will learn steadily and eventually amass a workable level of skill and confidence. One way is to keep a radio tuned to a local station, only loud enough to hear the words and phrases. At first it will be totally unintelligible, but as you study and get accustomed to the tone and sentence rhythm you will gradually pick out single syllables, then words, phrases, and finally sentences. Repeat them aloud. In your interactions with host nation personnel you will also learn key words such as those related to weapons, explosives, vehicles, commands, and simple conversational phrases. Write them down phonetically and learn to pronounce them. When your interpreter is talking to a local, listen closely to see how he uses phrases and accompanying gestures. Your host nation counterparts will probably assist you in this, but don't ask or expect them to become tutors; they have other things to do. You will be surprised at how fast you will be able to pick up snatches of conversation, so develop listening skills. Various dialects can be a problem, but do not get discouraged; keep trying.

Let's talk about translators. Before going out to talk to host nation centers of influence or your counterpart, go over what



Map 2 — Closer View of IV Corps Tactical Zone

you plan to say with the interpreter to make sure he understands your intent. Depending on the interpreter's skill and familiarity with American English, you will want to avoid slang, jargon, and idioms that may throw him a curve. If he has studied English in school instead of picking it up on the street, it was likely standard English but did not expose him to idiomatic usage. If you want him to accurately translate your message, speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences, pausing after each phrase, and watch him. Give him time to translate. When he stops talking, go on to the next point, but remember that he has to absorb your message, translate the ideas, and communicate the intent and essence to your counterpart. Some conversations will be routine, unemotional, and easy for him to translate, but others will not. When emotions are running high, keep your cool and let him finish the message. Do not interrupt him; instead use the time to listen carefully and formulate what you're going to say next, and watch the person to whom you are speaking for reactions and changes of expression.

While we're on the subject of language, remember this: the locals understand far more than you think, even though they may be unwilling or unable to speak English effectively. By now, they've been exposed to a great many Americans, have heard the language, probably picked up key words and phrases — including negative comments about their nation and its customs — and have developed that same passive understanding I mentioned earlier. Make sure your subordinates understand this: a careless joke or insensitive cultural comparison can destroy your credibility. Every member of your team must understand this and take it to heart. You may be the most sincere, skilled negotiator on the planet, but another American's muttered comment or smirk can undermine everything you're trying to accomplish. The host nation's people know far more than we do about the local enemy and the threats he can pose, and if treated properly will share that information with us. If one of your team members supports your goals and intent at less than 100 percent, replace him or her.

Today's cultural awareness training is built upon the strengths and weaknesses of the training that prepared us for service in Southeast Asia, although we received comparatively little on customs and courtesies, focusing instead on what we needed for the immediate requirements of the duties we would be performing. Having been selected for advisor duty, I was fortunate to attend the U.S. Army Military Assistance Training Advisor Course at Fort Bragg, N.C. Instruction was heavy on the Vietnamese language, U.S. objectives and current operations in Vietnam, the organization and training of regional forces, and the key roles played by the district and village chiefs. We also learned a great deal about explosives and demolitions and the detection and setting of booby traps.

Just as in Afghanistan today, the resourcefulness of the enemy in Vietnam and his supporters was remarkable. Their eyes and ears were everywhere. They employed a variety of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but their effects and sophistication were primitive compared to today's IEDs. The VC would sometimes quickly move into the impact zone of a B-52 or other bomb strike, count the craters — they knew the payload of each type of U.S. aircraft — and start looking for the ones that had not detonated. Once dug up, these 750- and 500-pound bombs could be defused and hauled off to be used as truly impressive command detonated mines, but this was a comparatively rare event, due to the difficulty in excavating a 750-pound bomb from 10-12 feet of Mekong Delta mud, and because of the sheer logistics of moving their prize to where it could be wired for detonation and reburied without any of this being detected. A far more frequent form of IED was an artillery or mortar shell, either a fired round which had malfunctioned or one which had not been collected from the drop zone (DZ) following an airdropped resupply for the 105mm section at our district headquarters. VC would comb the rice paddy that was our DZ after dark, looking for the odd round that had sunk unnoticed into the mud. I was finally able to convince the district chief to have his troops conduct detailed sweeps of the DZ after all drops and cross-check the load list with the rounds recovered until all were accounted for, something that greatly reduced casualties from command-detonated 105mm shells. This lesson is no less relevant to today's global war on terrorism, where checking your area and litter discipline can literally be a matter of life and death. Just as in Vietnam, insurgents will use anything and everything against us. If something appears out of place, it is probably there for a reason.

Information operations, often pigeonholed under the category of propaganda in the 1960s, have achieved a far greater degree of sophistication than I experienced four decades ago. Today, Al Qaeda and their surrogates are able to rapidly exploit local, regional, and international media — including our own — to communicate their message. When I first arrived in Vietnam, VC elements were still fighting in many of the major cities, and Saigon was packed with refugees fleeing fighting in the suburbs and countryside around the capitol. Our Braniff airliner was on its final approach to Tan Son Nhut air base, only to be diverted to Bien Hoa because

of a VC rocket attack underway on Tan Son Nhut. Sappers and small teams of VC still roamed the city, but they were being ruthlessly hunted down and killed by U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers, who went after them with the grim determination of men with a job to do. The air of uncertainty surrounding the capitol created an ideal growth medium for speculation and defeatism, and the aggressors did not miss the opportunity. The VC relied heavily on random attacks and word-of-mouth messages to create the impression that there were greater numbers of them in the city than was actually the case. This is no different today, where the message of one villager to another is the best and most credible sort of information operation, having greater credibility that any leaflet, broadcast, or other media image.

Just as today, in 1968 the international media, including our own in the U.S., were intent on getting the news out ahead of their competitors, and repeated whatever they could get — either on their own or as Communist press releases — without elaborating on either the full extent of casualties suffered by the VC or the limited objectives they had actually achieved. Without committing extensive resources to their media effort, the VC and NVA were thus able to influence public opinion here and abroad, and it was this external feedback that created the sense of foreboding that pervaded Vietnamese public opinion during those first trying months of 1968. The South Vietnamese government sought to restore stability, both by its own public announcements and by denying the Communists access to media. Radio stations taken over by rebels soon found their power cut off. Our own province capitol of Soc Trang was penetrated, but ARVN units quickly sealed off access and egress routes and set about mopping up the sappers and rifleman who now found themselves with no way out. Sporadic gunfire was a part of the city's routine until well into June 1968, but ARVN successes were well enough publicized to encourage the citizens to resume their day-to-day business. The press and broadcast operation seriously undermined the morale of the remaining VC and served to dry up what little support they had been receiving from sympathizers.

Give your counterpart reason to trust you. An advisor's credibility is his stock in trade, and your counterparts must come to understand that your word is your bond, and because of this you must never promise anything that you cannot deliver. You control the assets available to you, but for anything else you need to coordinate before you find yourself in over your head. People will ask for everything from money to assistance in rebuilding infrastructure, and if your response is going to be "I'll try," make sure they understand that this does not constitute a promise to deliver the goods, but that you will make an effort to resolve the matter. And this is why you need to know what you can count on before you enter into negotiations. A last comment: keep track of what you are asked to do and what you agree to. Keep a pocket notebook, write it down, and keep the details of negotiations confidential. Faced with a cloud of conflicting demands, it is easy to lose sight of details, and that little notebook will save you a whole lot of trouble.

Don't go in blind. Talk to your predecessor if at all possible. Find out who the key players are, whom you can trust and whom you need to watch, what ongoing unfinished business he's leaving behind, where he has not been successful, and why. In many areas, his commitments may be your commitments, because the locals only understand that the U.S. Army promised to restore power or water treatment and that hasn't happened yet. Changing attitudes and building credibility takes time, and you will be reaping the rewards — and disappointments — of your predecessor's work for a matter of months, just as your own successes may not become evident until well after you took those first tentative steps. What we see as small steps may in fact

Photo courtesy of author

An advisory detachment returns from an operation in July 1968. The Vietnamese RTO has an AN/PRC-77 FM radio. Note that both advisors are carrying M-72 LAWs in addition to their individual weapons.

come across as giant successes in the eyes of the people we are trying to help. Continuity shows commitment, and your successor in turn needs to know what you're leaving for him to accomplish. This is where your next higher comes in: he needs to understand and agree to the plan and what it will cost. It may be great to hit the ground running and launch all sorts of mind-boggling initiatives, but if they're accomplished at the cost of projects the locals have been counting on, the net gain for U.S. credibility is zero. When we redeploy, the last thing we want to leave behind is the Middle Eastern version of the cargo cult, waiting eternally for the great plane load of largesse that never quite gets there.

Tact and diplomacy will be some of your most important tools in trade. We are used to dealing and speaking directly and openly with one another, but other cultures do business differently. What we take for openness can be seen as bluntness. Our insistence on punctuality is baffling to those we are trying to advise, and may easily be interpreted as an attempt to impose our customs and priorities on them. If a meeting is set for 1400, be there, but don't take it too hard if the counterparts show up a little later. We want to get right down to business, but they will want to sip coffee, pass the time of day, renew acquaintances, eventually get around to the subject at hand, and conclude when they feel they've accomplished enough. The agenda is good for a plan, but don't be surprised if you don't get to all the topics in the first sitting. They may want the same things we want, but they have a different way of getting to them. Patience is truly a virtue, and once we understand that we will become less easily irritated and frustrated, and our body language and facial expressions will reflect this. And our counterparts will notice it.

Counterinsurgency is not a simple matter, but all successful counterinsurgencies have recognized that the host nation population is where campaigns are won or lost. The guerrilla seeks to draw his psychological, financial, and logistical support from the population, as he always has. We have heard Mao Tse-Tung's water and fish analogy enough to understand it in light of the global war on terrorism, and we need to take it to heart. If we try to master — or at least learn — the host nation language and learn to use translators effectively, if we develop and sustain our credibility with local citizens and their leaders, and if we continue to expand our cultural awareness training programs and dismiss the idea that such subjects are too touchy-feely, we will have taken a giant step toward defeating al Qaeda and their surrogates, whatever names they may go by. And we cannot afford to underestimate the enemy's resourcefulness, his determination, or his ability to conduct effective information operations. The insurgency is crumbling. Our adversary is losing men faster than he can replace them, his support at home and abroad is dwindling, and our allies in Afghanistan are increasing their pressure against him. We have learned the lessons that contribute to a successful counterinsurgency, and now we need to continue to build on them.

Let me talk about saving face. If you want to lose the trust and respect of the tribal leader you are trying to advise, just do something or allow something to happen that will embarrass him among his peers. In most regions in which we are prosecuting the global war on terrorism, we are dealing with closed societies that are incredibly suspicious of outsiders, and with your clothing, your cell phones, your outward manifestations of wealth, the firepower you can summon, and the largess you can dispense you are most certainly a stranger. Be self-effacing, receptive to discussion, willing to learn the customs, language, and culture, and you may earn an opening that will allow you access to the people you need to reach.

Finally, extend respect. My first counterpart in Vietnam was a Vietnamese first lieutenant, Trung-Uy Hiep, who had been commanding the 568 Regional Force rifle company for seven years, since I was a sophomore in high school. He knew the names of most of the local VC officers and NCOs as well as he knew his own soldiers, and was a skilled combat leader. We shared advice and food, planned and executed tactical operations, and visited hamlet and village elders. What did I bring to the table? Access to U.S. field artillery fires; heliborne medical evacuation of casualties; rotary wing fire support and resupply; U.S. Air Force fast movers and B-52 strikes; and access to a logistical system that worked. Trung-Uy Hiep and I shared the respect that only members of our profession can claim, but respect demands yet more, and that involves that half of many nations' populations who go unnoticed: the women. You need to make it plain to each and every one of your soldiers that they cannot under any circumstances become involved with host nation personnel of the opposite sex, for it is not only inappropriate but the consequences are catastrophic. In Vietnam enemy propagandists were quick to seize upon any perceived exploitation of females, but their media access was virtually nonexistent nearly that half a century ago. That is no longer the case, and the potential embarrassment to our Army and the nation can be devastating. Let me be perfectly clear about this: the offense and disgrace lie not in the publicity, but in the crime that engendered it. Ours is a disciplined Army, and we can have it no other way.

We are most certainly a nation at war, and we will be in it for a long time. It will be fought on others' turf, and if we read and heed T.E. Lawrence's painstakingly learned wisdom we will have gained a great deal of useful information. Others have been advisors to other nations' police, Army, and special operations forces and can add to what I have tried to present here. I welcome your input, and we will use it to continue to train the force. Follow me!

Editor's Note: *This article first appeared in the September-October 2007 issue of* Infantry *Magazine.*

LTC (Retired) Russell A. Eno is currently serving as the editor of *Infantry* Magazine. As an Infantry lieutenant, he served as an advisor to the 566 and 567 Regional Force Rifle Companies in the Mekong Delta, Ba Xuyen Province. He is a 1967 graduate of the University of New Hampshire ROTC program. He retired from active duty in 1991 and has been editor of *Infantry* since 1992.