

# NO SIMPLE SOLUTION

## Regional Force Operations in Hau Nghia, Vietnam



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**T**HE USE OF indigenous forces in U.S. military operations is an important topic to military professionals. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reemphasized the importance of developing the security capacity of host states. This article examines territorial forces in the Vietnam War to provide insight for officers in the field today who are attempting to accomplish similar missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hau Nghia was only one of the 44 provinces in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Its history was not typical of what U.S. commanders experienced in Vietnam, but Hau Nghia's narrative captures many of the triumphs and disappointments of the use and misuse of territorial forces. The struggle in the province was a war unto itself. In this microcosm, the members of U.S. Advisory Team 43 lived, fought, and died while advising and supporting South Vietnamese forces. The problems that plagued the advisory team and South Vietnamese forces seem strikingly familiar to those following the work of U.S. forces working alongside Iraqi and Afghan troops. The difficulty of instilling discipline, developing competent leaders, and providing the resources to accomplish the mission remain formidable challenges to American officers charged with establishing competent and capable institutions at the local level in these insurgent conflicts.

The Regional Forces in Hau Nghia were not successful because their capabilities required the presence of larger U.S. and Vietnamese forces to eliminate enemy threats beyond their engagement capabilities. Once U.S. forces departed, there were no forces capable of filling the vacuum. The United States had given primacy to establishing immediate security by using U.S. forces over training and developing Vietnamese Regional Forces. Consequently, the Regional Forces never developed into a force capable of providing security in the province without U.S. forces in support, and the physical security of the province decreased, along with the possibility of reestablishing the legitimacy of the government. The U.S. focus on short-term solutions to security, while neglecting preparations for their eventual withdrawal, meant that success was improbable, even before the impact of troop withdrawals rendered the flaws of the American

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PHOTO: Army of the Republic of Vietnam rangers defend Saigon during the Tet Offensive, 1968. (DOD)



U.S. Marine Corps

**Battle of Hamo Village during the Tet Offensive. U.S. Marines and ARVN troops defend a position against enemy attack, 1968.**

strategy clear. The U.S. military's focus on operations and the elimination of enemy units reduced resources and shifted emphasis from the decisive objective—the establishment of a legitimate South Vietnamese government.

### **The United States and Vietnam: 1965-1967**

The arrival of U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam in 1965 signaled a shift from the limited advisory effort initiated under the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. U.S. forces under the command of General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), focused on the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) as it initiated attacks into South Vietnam in order to overthrow the South Vietnamese government (GVN). By 1966, U.S. forces had prevented the collapse of the GVN, and Westmoreland continued to implement his strategy which aimed to pacify South Vietnam in three successive phases.

The first phase consisted of securing bases from which to conduct operations and secure South Vietnam. The second phase focused on targeting and eliminating enemy base camps and sanctuaries to prevent communist forces from attacking the South

Vietnamese population. The third and final stage directed U.S. military forces against the remaining communist forces to either eliminate them or drive them out of the provinces. Westmoreland stated that pacification operations and the strengthening and development of South Vietnamese military forces, including territorial forces, had “to be pursued throughout all three phases.”<sup>1</sup>

Without the ability to target the logistical base of the NVA and the Viet Cong insurgents in North Vietnam, MACV was limited to defeating enemy forces as they appeared in force in South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> By 1967, President Johnson was encouraging Westmoreland to gradually reduce the need for U.S. military power in South Vietnam by shifting the major military operations to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). Although not labeled “Vietnamization” by then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird until 1969, the chief motives for the policy stemmed from the apparent ineffectiveness of MACV's strategy and declining support for Westmoreland's request for increases in combat troops in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Vietnamization required the South Vietnamese forces to take over the mobile offensive operations conducted by U.S. forces as well as the pacification operations already delegated to them by MACV.

Prior to 1967, numerous military and civilian agencies participated in pacification operations, including the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). To better manage the pacification process, Westmoreland established the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program and the position of Deputy Commander U.S. MACV for CORDS.<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Robert W. Komer acted as the head of CORDS. Each corps command had a CORDS deputy responsible for coordinating the civilian and military pacification advisers operating at the province and district level.<sup>5</sup> Despite U.S. forces and agencies providing resources and oversight of pacification operations, the major role of conducting pacification operations in the provinces and districts fell to Regional Forces and Popular Forces. Even though Regional Forces and other South Vietnamese territorial forces carried the brunt of pacification operations prior to the implementation of Vietnamization policy, the number of Regional Forces increased dramatically from 1969 to 1970.<sup>6</sup>

The development of CORDS accelerated pacification operations throughout South Vietnam. The 1968 Tet Offensive temporarily halted those pacification operations, but the communist offensive also signaled the weakening of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. The most significant development and operations of Regional Forces in Hau Nghia occurred under the influence of the Vietnamization policy and the acceptance by many American leaders of the apparent success of pacification operations after the 1968 Tet Offensive. Although the Regional Forces filled a vital role in securing the population in Hau Nghia, the pacification of the province ultimately failed because the withdrawal of U.S. forces under the Vietnamization policy required the Regional Forces and other South Vietnamese forces to shoulder responsibilities for which they were not adequately prepared.

### **Pacifying South Vietnam: Extraordinary Measures**

The National Liberation Front's (NLF's) communist infrastructure in South Vietnam had widened the gap between the South Vietnamese government and the rural population throughout the 1960s. The government could not build its legitimacy if

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communist forces retained the ability to influence the population or attack government programs. Pacification operations conducted by the U.S. Army and the government sought to eliminate communist influence and build legitimacy. Building legitimacy required “extraordinary measures applied over a long period of time” in order to “[turn the population] towards actual allegiance of a nationalist government” due to the de facto control of Hau Nghia by communist forces.<sup>7</sup> Ridding South Vietnam of communist influence and establishing the legitimacy of the government required the pacification of the population and a presence in the countryside. Many social and economic programs were used to pacify the provinces, but the use of military force by the United States and South Vietnam was always the principal means for achieving a lasting political victory.<sup>8</sup> In short, the success of the social and economic programs used to build government legitimacy depended on the physical security provided by military operations.

Although the military operations conducted by the U.S. Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam dominate the history of the Vietnam War, the territorial forces also played an important role in securing the population from the NLF. Territorial forces enlisted and operated at the district and province level in which they lived. The Regional Forces were company-sized territorial forces assigned at the province level to secure the population from communist forces. Over time, the Regional Forces developed into an organization that was larger and endured more casualties than the ARVN. Studying the Regional Forces' operations in the Hau Nghia Province from 1968 through 1970 uncovers the complexity and challenges of using territorial forces to combat an insurgency.

The Regional Forces were part of a series of security rings that protected the people. The MACV established a system of three rings of protection in

Hau Nghia and South Vietnam's provinces to provide security. The first and largest ring consisted of U.S. and ARVN forces tasked with eliminating large enemy formations (roughly battalion-size or larger). The Regional Forces were the second ring, and they operated at the province and district level to prevent enemy units (roughly company-sized or smaller) from infiltrating villages and hamlets. The Regional Forces' task was to eliminate NLF units that had slipped past the larger protective ring of U.S. and ARVN units.<sup>9</sup> Popular Force, National Police, and other units made up the third and final ring. Their task was to infiltrate and destroy the communist infrastructure at the village and hamlet level. These three security rings were intended to destroy NLF counter-pacification operations in Hau Nghia.

In theory, Regional Forces contributed to province security by protecting the population. They protected the population by attacking NLF units that attempted to influence the population and destroy pacification programs. Specifically, the Regional Forces conducted tactical operations, such as patrols and ambushes, to stop NLF movements and operations in the province. These operations increased the risk of death, capture, and relocation for NLF members, decreased the communists' ability to reach the population, and forced them to either engage U.S. and South Vietnamese forces or withdraw from the area. However, incompetent execution, enemy capabilities, and an overly defensive posture hindered the Regional Forces ability to secure the population. The Regional Force companies' incompetent execution of tactical operations failed to destroy NLF units and prevent them from infiltrating the local villages and hamlets. The failure of the outer ring of U.S. and ARVN forces to stop large enemy units required the Regional Forces to engage enemy units that overwhelmed their capabilities. Finally, the defensive posture of most Regional Force companies decreased their ability to engage and destroy NLF units. As a result, the offensive operations needed to prevent NLF units from infiltrating the villages and hamlets did not occur. These factors allowed NLF units freedom of movement among the population of Hau Nghia. In turn, this prevented the population from supporting governmental pacification operations because

there was no guarantee of security from NLF and other communist reprisals.

## Regional Force Operations in Hau Nghia: A Shield for Pacification Operations

In 1963, President Ngo Dinh Diem organized the province of Hau Nghia by detaching and then combining four districts from neighboring provinces.<sup>10</sup> Diem created Hau Nghia because he wanted greater administrative control over the area which was strategically important due to its location between Saigon and the Cambodian border.<sup>11</sup> After the creation of the province, U.S. forces increased as did the development of pacification programs in Hau Nghia.<sup>12</sup> The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support group leaders supervised pacification operations in South Vietnam. To increase government control in Hau Nghia, province officials developed the 1968 Hau Nghia Pacification Plan during the final months of 1967. The plan "aimed at defeating NVA/VC forces in order to restore the country and to build a free nation" and was largely executed by provincial Revolutionary Development teams.<sup>13</sup> The Regional Forces played a key role in supporting the pacification plan.

The 1968 pacification plan used Regional Forces to secure Hau Nghia by eliminating NLF units and preventing the enemy from infiltrating the hamlets and villages. These two tasks required the Regional Forces to perform a variety of missions to contribute to securing the province. The pacification plan had three stages. The purpose of stage one was to clear enemy forces from the areas surrounding population centers.<sup>14</sup> Although the U.S. forces dealt with larger enemy forces, the Regional Forces had the task of clearing areas that were not strongly held by the NLF. Stage two was designed to eliminate the communists' influence by destroying their infrastructure and providing security to the population. This stage required Regional Forces to destroy enemy units and infrastructure while securing key facilities and routes within the province.<sup>15</sup> Stage three operations encompassed continuing to develop pacification programs and conducting a census. Regional Forces protected the teams as they carried out their mission to maintain the government's presence in pacified hamlets as well those not under government control.<sup>16</sup>

The success of the pacification campaign depended on the ability of allied forces “to provide a shield against larger enemy units behind which pacification can progress.”<sup>17</sup> This required the destruction or displacement of enemy units in Hau Nghia. The removal of enemy forces was vital because their operations disrupted the pacification programs. Standing between the pacification plan and the population, the allied forces targeted over 3,000 enemy troops in various areas of the province.<sup>18</sup> As the pacification plan became final as 1967 came to a close, the number of enemy units in Hau Nghia increased due to North Vietnam’s preparations for the 1968 Tet Offensive.

### **A Sharp Setback in Security: Tet 1968**

The 1968 Tet Offensive halted all pacification operations in Hau Nghia until the spring of 1968. Highway 1, which ran from Saigon to the Cambodian border, was a key avenue of approach that enemy units used to attack the capital. The large number of enemy units passing through and occupying the province during Tet decreased the security of Hau Nghia.<sup>19</sup> The relocation of the 2d Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division outside of the province also caused a decrease in security. This vacuum allowed NLF units more freedom of movement, and they began to target Regional Force companies during the second phase of the Tet Offensive in Hau Nghia.<sup>20</sup>

This had two effects on the Regional Forces. First, the large number of enemy units forced them into a defensive posture, preventing the Regional Forces from conducting offensive operations to clear enemy units from the hamlets and the villages in Hau Nghia. The second effect was the Regional Forces’ inability to shift to offensive operations. The strength of the enemy units in the province required Regional Forces to wait for larger U.S. and ARVN units to clear out the enemy units before they could resume security operations. The Regional Forces’ operations after Tet and until the end of 1968 focused on regaining their offensive capabilities and reorganizing to provide security to Hau Nghia. The NLF had seized the initiative and forced the Regional Forces to deviate from their original task.

The failure of the outer ring of U.S. and ARVN forces to stop NLF units from infiltrating into

the Regional Force companies’ sectors reduced provincial security.<sup>21</sup> In most cases, this infiltration was not due to the failure of U.S. and ARVN forces but to the placement or absence of these forces in Hau Nghia. The large number of NLF units operating in Hau Nghia continued to keep the Regional Forces in a defensive posture until late March 1968. The Regional Forces’ inability to provide security for the Revolutionary Development teams and programs created limited results in pacification operations.<sup>22</sup>

The Tet Offensive, and the corresponding influx of VC units in Hau Nghia, revealed the flaw in the use of territorial forces. Their dependency on large screening units, such as U.S. and ARVN battalions, limited their usefulness. This deficiency was true for much of the war as U.S. units shifted locations according to the needs of higher commands and not the needs of province security.

Regional Force operations in 1968 did not affect pacification operations as much as those of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, but the Regional Forces possessed certain qualities that U.S. units lacked. Captured enemy documents revealed that U.S. forces were not effective in halting VC operations in Hau Nghia because they were unfamiliar with the terrain.<sup>23</sup> U.S. forces often used predictable routes or did not make the best use of terrain when sweeping for enemy units, and they often became the victims of ambushes. Regional Force companies, based in their home province, were very familiar with the areas in which they operated. However, the lack of proper equipment and aggressive leadership negated this strength whenever U.S. units did not support Regional Force units.<sup>24</sup> Patrols and ambushes led by unmotivated or incompetent leaders resulted in noise and light indiscipline. This prevented the Regional Force units from effectively engaging the NLF units operating in their area. Advisors described Regional Force patrols in one monthly report as “tactical walks” that served the sole purpose of meeting the quota required of each unit.<sup>25</sup> The presence of large enemy units, most often a result of a momentary absence of U.S. forces from the province, also restricted Regional Force units to operations near their outposts, with most consisting of a quick clearing of the area within sight of the outpost.<sup>26</sup> Cooperation between U.S.



U.S. Marine Corps

**U.S. Marines move through the ruins of Dai Do hamlet after several days of intense fighting during the Tet Offensive.**

and Regional Force units, however, balanced the strengths and weaknesses of each unit.

Although U.S. Army and Regional Forces were interacting in limited incidents, both units increased their performance when conducting joint operations.<sup>27</sup> Province senior advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Carl F. Bernard, reported that the “operations of the joint U.S.-VN task force in Trang Bang and Cu Chi Districts [consisting of one U.S. company and Regional Force and Popular Force units] have proven highly successful.”<sup>28</sup> Despite the benefits of cooperation, joint operations between the U.S. 25th Infantry Division and Regional Forces were not the norm throughout 1968.

While the Tet Offensive had “brought a sharp setback in security” in the early months of 1968, by September, U.S. province and district advisors reported increases in pacification.<sup>29</sup> The progress was due to more U.S. and South Vietnamese military operations aimed at enemy units and the stand down of VC and NLF units in preparation for future offensives.<sup>30</sup> Only one of the four district advisors credits the stand-down of enemy units as the sole reason for the success of pacification operations in the fall of 1968. The other district advisors credit the increase in operations by U.S. and territorial forces

as the reason. Although the district commanders did not agree on what led to the decline of the NLF, every district report showed that pacification success was directly related to the absence of enemy forces and their ability to destroy people and property in the province.<sup>31</sup> This observation validated the need for territorial forces as a long-term security force in Hau Nghia. However, the gains in security did not lead to a similar increase in the legitimacy of the government. The role of Regional Forces was important, but operations in 1968 had not uncovered all the flaws of the system. Pacification operations in 1969 showed the successful, yet constrained, implementation of Regional Force companies.

### **Military Force in Pacification: Always the Key Component**

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign of 1969 relied on military force to increase pacification in Hau Nghia by “[expanding] territorial security as rapidly as possible.”<sup>32</sup> The pacification plans of 1969 emphasized the successful pairing U.S. units with Regional Force companies in the final months of 1968 and incorporated it into the plan. Pairing the U.S. and Regional Forces combined the training and leadership of U.S. units with the Vietnamese units’

knowledge of local terrain and the language. The presence of five battalions of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division in Hau Nghia had reduced the freedom of movement of VC units in the final months of 1968, and the 1969 pacification plan called for an increase in U.S. and Vietnamese forces throughout the province.<sup>33</sup> Based on the 1969 pacification plan, the number of Regional Force companies in Hau Nghia increased from 12 to 32 by the end of the campaign. Pacification of Hau Nghia reached a high mark in 1969, and the doubling of Regional Force companies played a role in this success.<sup>34</sup>

Proper training and supply of Regional Forces also increased the capabilities, and confidence of the units in Hau Nghia. The 12 Regional Force companies organic to Hau Nghia received M-16 rifles beginning in November 1968.<sup>35</sup> Before they received the M-16s, Regional Force companies carried WWII-era M-2 carbines and Browning Automatic Rifles as compared to the AK-47 assault rifles issued to most NLF units. Province records reported increased confidence of Regional Forces after they successfully engaged enemy units with their new weapons.<sup>36</sup> However, the limited number of mobile advisory teams hampered the amount of training Regional Force units received on weapons such as the M-16 and tactics. The shortage of training caused by the lack of sufficient resources affected Regional Force units' ability to execute missions properly. The increase in operations in 1969 also affected their effectiveness by pushing them to their operational limits.

The tempo of operations in Hau Nghia in January 1969 caused problems for the Regional Forces and exposed their weaknesses. In an effort to expand security, Regional Force companies participated in clearing operations that dispersed them throughout the province. This dispersion and increased contact with enemy units affected their performance. Lieutenant Colonel Bernard reported that "casualties (50 percent of the Hau Nghia RF/PF in 1968) have taken a heavy toll of the effectiveness of the Sector Forces and many of the present unit commanders do not have the required amounts of initiative."<sup>37</sup> However, Bernard went on to report that the close proximity of U.S. forces, primarily the 2d Brigade of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, "compensated" for the "weaknesses characteristic of many Vietnamese

unit commanders."<sup>38</sup> Problems in operations continued to necessitate strong support and the protective outer ring of large U.S. and ARVN forces.

The lack of training and the high tempo of operations were not the only factors that affected the performance of the Regional Forces. NLF units launched their post-Tet offensive on 22 February 1969. The resurgence of attacks, after the calmer months at the end of 1968, decreased security, according to the Hamlet Evaluation System report. More important, "[U.S. and Vietnamese forces'] credibility as defenders [was] seriously threatened."<sup>39</sup> The enemy units relied on terror tactics to target specific individuals or projects because the presence of friendly units in or around population centers prevented the NLF from taking decisive action. The new offensive also led to the relocation of several U.S. units outside the province. This shifted the burden of security towards the Regional Forces and played an important role in the regression of pacification.<sup>40</sup> The post-Tet offensive of 1969 was not as violent or disruptive as the 1968 offensive, but it removed the initiative from U.S. and Vietnamese forces. Regional Forces remained understrength and under-supported until late spring due to their organizational weaknesses and the enemy's offensive.

Hau Nghia once again experienced an increase in security and pacification in April 1969 with the return of U.S. units and an increase in the number of Regional Force companies.<sup>41</sup> Allied units established physical security and restricted enemy attacks and movements. By the end of September, 32 Regional Force companies were operating in Hau Nghia.<sup>42</sup> A large portion of them relocated to Hau Nghia from other provinces in South Vietnam. Recruitment had been difficult in Hau Nghia, as in other provinces, because the risks of serving in the Regional Forces outweighed the benefits. Regional Force members stayed near their homes while they served, so the local guerrillas knew who they were and where their families lived. This led to Regional Force members increasing the defensive posture of the force by keeping their families inside their outposts because they were unwilling to expose them to danger. The addition of extra Regional Force companies from other provinces, however, gave the Regional Forces the manpower to carry out aggressive operations against NLF units. The

presence of an overwhelming number of U.S. and Regional Force units increased security and once again demonstrated that “force [in pacification operations] was always the key component.”<sup>43</sup>

By November 1969, enemy activity was increasing but the presence of the 2d and 3d Brigades of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division provided Regional Forces support in the form of eight U.S. battalions and advisors. Under the *Dong Tien* program, U.S. commanders provided two infantry sections to each Regional Force company, increasing the territorial force’s effectiveness on ambushes and night patrols.<sup>44</sup> The December province report gives an example of a successful joint operation between U.S. and Regional Forces and shows the benefit of reliable intelligence and combining the capabilities of both units: “On 15 December [1969] the 773 RF company combined with C Troop, 3-4 U.S. Cavalry, picked up 332 enemy weapons in two caches pointed out by two *hoi chanh* [VC deserters].”<sup>45</sup> While other provincial reports highlight the lack of local knowledge by U.S. units and the incompetency of Regional Forces, this report shows the benefit of Regional Forces operating with U.S. units. Aided by enemy deserters, the Regional Forces understood the area and population and were able to destroy a resource used to support enemy operations. However, successful joint operations like this were the exception rather than the norm in Hau Nghia because Regional Forces often lacked capable commanders.

The absence of competent leadership contributed to the ineffectiveness of Regional Force operations. December province reports recorded an increase in enemy activity and that “aggressive local security measures by RF/PF [Regional and Popular Forces] could have reduced the effect of VC activity.”<sup>46</sup> Leadership problems continued to plague the Regional Forces in Hau Nghia, and the lack of aggressive operations was due to the lack of

leadership. Other than the advisors attached to the Regional Force companies with the mobile advisory teams, Regional Force company commanders did not have an experienced leader to mentor and develop them. More often than not, the mobile advisory team advisors had roughly six months of service in country and no experience as advisors, which limited their ability to coach, mentor, and train the Regional Force units.

An enemy attack on a hamlet in June 1969 highlights the lack of leadership. During an attack on the edge of the Trung Hoa hamlet, the 36th Regional Force Group Commander refused the guidance of Captain Wolfgang May, the leader of the Trung Lap advisory team. May urged the commander to send a platoon-sized reaction force to recover enemy bodies and equipment left on the battlefield before the enemy retrieved them. The commander refused, stating that the situation was too dangerous, even though May exposed himself to danger throughout the operation in an attempt to motivate the Regional Forces to action.<sup>47</sup> The inability of the Regional Force commander to aggressively pursue the enemy resulted in the loss of battlefield intelligence and contributed to the insecurity of the hamlet. Although leadership problems persisted, the influx of additional Regional Force companies and U.S. units in Hau Nghia improved security until the increase of enemy activity in late December. However, the high tide of pacification reached in 1969 could not continue. Even with the overwhelming presence of Regional Force companies, the slow withdrawal of U.S. units from Hau Nghia in 1970 exposed the Regional Forces’ weakness—lack of proper support.

### **Vietnamization in Hau Nghia: An Extremely Precarious Position**

Vietnamization and the struggle to increase the performance of Regional Force companies characterized Regional Force operations in 1970. The enemy limited their activity within the province for most of that year. The U.S. and Vietnamese attacks on VC sanctuaries adjacent to Hau Nghia in Cambodia overshadowed the terrorist tactics that the VC had relied on for the past year.<sup>48</sup> Pacification operations continued in the province and Regional Forces increased their operations to

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take advantage of the vacuum created by VC units withdrawing and regrouping after the destruction of their bases at Ba Thu and Dia Gai.<sup>49</sup> However, the steady withdrawal of U.S. units increased the realization among province officials that the Regional Forces would soon be assuming greater responsibilities in securing the province.

Although Regional Forces proved adequate in their assigned mission, the U.S. Army units still determined the level of security in Hau Nghia.<sup>50</sup> Regional Forces continued to conduct joint operations with U.S. forces, mostly clearing lines of communications within the province.<sup>51</sup> However, evaluations by senior province advisors still rated the Regional Forces as “marginal” in performance, even though Regional Forces made progress in clearing province roads without U.S. assistance.<sup>52</sup> The withdrawal of the 2d Brigade of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division in February 1970 overshadowed the small victories of the Regional Forces.<sup>53</sup> This reduced the number of U.S. battalions in the province from eight to four. When the U.S. 25th Infantry Division left Hau Nghia in September 1970, the ARVN 25th Division took over the base camp at Cu Chi, leaving Regional Forces to fill the gap in the province’s security cordon.<sup>54</sup> The withdrawal of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division left Hau Nghia without any U.S. combat forces for the first time since 1966.<sup>55</sup> The absence of the outer ring of security provided by the U.S. units eased the pressure on enemy units in Hau Nghia. This led to an increase in enemy operations to disrupt pacification operations.<sup>56</sup>

The Regional Forces continued their efforts to secure the population, even though they lost their main source of support. The U.S. 25th Infantry Division had conducted various training programs with the Regional Forces before it left, but limited four- to six-day training sessions could not turn around an organization beset with leadership and supply issues.<sup>57</sup> Senior commanders started to relieve subordinates that did not perform, such as the unfortunate commander of the 52d Regional Forces Group who was “neither imaginative or aggressive.”<sup>58</sup> Night operations also increased with greater focus on patrols instead of the usual static ambushes.<sup>59</sup>

However, the final months of 1970 did not bring any great changes in operations or performance.

The lack of leadership and tactical training over the years, combined with high casualties, prevented the Regional Forces from taking over the increased security responsibilities required by the enemy situation in Hau Nghia. The lack of support for the Regional Forces did not immediately destroy security in Hau Nghia. However, the lack of progress in unit effectiveness over the years meant that without an influx of combat power similar in quality to the U.S. 25th Infantry Division the government’s control of Hau Nghia would continue to decline. The presence of an undefeated enemy and the withdrawal of U.S. military support created “an extremely precarious position” for the government in Hau Nghia.<sup>60</sup>

### **Assessing the Regional Forces’ Performance in Hau Nghia**

Regional Forces in Hau Nghia left much to be desired in mission performance, but the concept of territorial forces as a major contributor to securing the population proved useful under the right conditions. Colonel C.R. Truman reported in August 1968 that Regional Forces “represent the greatest potential . . . for finding and destroying” the enemy.<sup>61</sup> Regional Forces made positive contributions to pacification in Hau Nghia, but examining the internal and external factors that affected the Regional Forces reveals their critical weaknesses. The internal factors of inadequate leadership and training only added to the more important external factor of the lack of continued U.S. military support. Even though Regional Forces operated within the sound concept of three security rings, the conditions present in Hau Nghia and Vietnam from 1968 to 1970 created factors that destroyed the interdependent rings.

Contributing to the breakdown of the security system was the lack of aggressive leadership and proper training. While reviewing the performance of Regional Forces in Vietnam, Colonel C.E. Jordan, Jr. noted that “lack of aggressiveness and training in command and control” limited the usefulness of Regional Forces. The mission of the Regional Forces required them to aggressively interdict and destroy enemy forces attempting to infiltrate the hamlets and villages of Hau Nghia. Inadequate leadership at the junior officer level resulted in operations characterized as “walks in the

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sun” that did not affect enemy forces significantly.<sup>62</sup> The inexperience of Regional Forces due to poor training also contributed to poor performance. Even though the number of mobile advisory teams increased throughout the war, they could not compensate for a lack of tactical training. The small number of advisors in each team (three to five) as well as a lack of training resources prevented them from conducting effective in-place training. The need for Regional Forces to operate in the province often prevented the units from conducting regular rotations at training areas. The internal factors did not significantly affect the security of Hau Nghia in 1968, but at the end of 1969, the slow withdrawal of U.S. Army units increased the responsibility of the Regional Forces.

The location and strength of U.S. forces ultimately determined the level of security, and by extension, progress in pacification. The eventual withdrawal of U.S. Army forces resulted in the breakdown of the security rings which the allied forces used to protect the population. Colonel C.E. Jordan reported that “[U.S. Army and Regional Force units] must be integrated for the purpose of accomplishing the common mission.”<sup>63</sup> Closer interaction with more competent and disciplined U.S. Army units resulted in an improvement in Regional Force operations. The function of U.S. Army units as a shield against large enemy units was also an important factor in the success of Regional Forces. Colonel Amos A. Jordan observed that “if enemy main force units [can be] suppressed, the key combat role has passed to territorial forces.”<sup>64</sup> When the 2d and 3d Brigades of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division operated in Hau Nghia, the Regional Forces performed effectively because the conditions allowed the Regional Forces to operate in the environment intended for their mission and capabilities. The opposite was true when large enemy formations bypassed U.S.

forces during the Tet Offensive of 1968. If large enemy forces penetrated the outer security ring, the Regional Forces lost their offensive capabilities and were ineffective. Although Regional Forces were an integral part of the security system, U.S. Army and NLF units were the decisive forces for pacification operations in Hau Nghia, not Regional Forces.<sup>65</sup>

The performance of Regional Forces in Hau Nghia highlights the potential strengths and weaknesses of territorial forces fighting an insurgency. The knowledge of the local populace and terrain enhanced the operations conducted by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division when it executed Joint operations with Regional Forces. The low cost and maintenance of territorial forces also allowed the government to locate a large number of troops in populated areas to provide security. The necessity of support when facing large enemy forces, however, was a critical weakness. Expecting Regional Forces in Hau Nghia to secure the population without adequate support by U.S. Army units was not realistic given the situation in Hau Nghia. The withdrawal of U.S. Army units in accordance with the U.S. Vietnamization policy signaled the official breakdown of the security system in Hau Nghia.<sup>66</sup>

In 1968, Colonel C.E. Jordan Jr. argued that the Regional Forces’ ability to provide territorial security “may prove decisive in the conduct of the war.”<sup>67</sup> The pacification operations conducted from 1968 to 1970 support Jordan’s assessment; however, the discontinued support of Vietnamese forces by the better supplied and more disciplined U.S. Army proved to be much more decisive in determining military victory. Pacification operations, and the security they sought to provide, had centered on the application of military force to eliminate the NLF’s influence in Hau Nghia. Jordan noted that—

Complexities and obvious weaknesses notwithstanding, the government’s organization for pacification is a compromise tailored to meet the complexity of the enemy threat and the existing political situation in RVN [Republic of Vietnam] . . . There is no simple solution. The basic system can be made to work.<sup>68</sup>

He was correct only in his estimate of territorial forces; unfortunately for the government, the enemy threat and political situation were

such that the system could not be made to work. The withdrawal of U.S. military forces and the breakdown of the security system they supported

meant that any hope of reestablishing government legitimacy through social and political means was unrealistic. **MR**

## NOTES

1. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 153.
2. Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2007), 16.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 265.
7. HQ, III Corps, *Evaluation Report: A Study of Pacification and Security in Cu Chi District, Hau Nghia Province*, 29 May 1968, Center of Military History, Hau Nghia Province File, 8 (hereafter CMH HPF).
8. Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in the Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 5. Bergerud argues that the South Vietnamese government's lack of legitimacy among the population (especially rural population) required the United States and other forces to eliminate the National Liberation Front (NLF) in order to allow the government to operate freely without the influence of a communist infrastructure in the population.
9. MACCORDS (Military Assistance Command) Fact Sheet, subject: Regional Forces (RF) and Popular Forces (PF), 17 December 1968, CMH HPF.
10. Bergerud, 11. The four districts included Duc Hoa and Duc Hue from Long An province, Trang Bang district from Tay Ninh, and Cu Chi district detached from Binh Duong province.
11. Bergerud, 11. See also Advisory Team 43, Hau Nghia Pacification Plan 1968, Annex C (Revolutionary Development) Box 27, RG 472, NARA II, The pacification plan describes Hau Nghia as having "great strategic importance as it is immediately adjacent to the Saigon—Gia Dinh capitol area."
12. Bergerud, 45, 141. Before the official commitment of U.S. ground forces in 1965, the NLF had firm control of parts of the province. After the influx of U.S. troops, clearing operations carried out by units of the 25th Infantry Division in Hau Nghia characterized the years 1966 to 1967.
13. Advisory Team 43, 1968 Hau Nghia Pacification Plan, Box 27, RG 472, NARA II; The North Vietnamese Army consisted of main force units while the Viet Cong (VC) units ranged from main force battalions to small squad elements located at the village level.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Advisory Team 43, Hau Nghia Pacification Plan 1968, Annex K (Regional and Popular Forces), Box 27, RG 472, NARA II.
16. Advisory Team 43, Hau Nghia Pacification Plan 1968, Annex C (Revolutionary Development), Box 27, RG 472, NARA II.
17. COL C.E. Jordan, Jr., RF/PF: 1968 (July-December) File, Debriefing Report, 8, CMH HPF.
18. Advisory Team #43, Hau Nghia Pacification Plan 1968, Annex B (Communist Forces), Box 27, RG 472, NARA II. There were four VC battalions (2,130 troops); three Local Companies (370 troops); four Municipal Platoons (130 troops); and more than 700 guerrillas in the various hamlets and villages of Hau Nghia.
19. *Ibid.*, 4.
20. HQ, III Corps, *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, February 1968, 3, CMH.
21. HQ, III Corps, *Evaluation Report: A Study of Pacification and Security in Cu Chi District, Hau Nghia Province*, 29 May 1968, 40, CMH HPF.
22. *Ibid.*, 27.
23. *Ibid.*, 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 43.
25. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, July 1968, 6.
26. *Ibid.* See also, *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, August 1968, subject: District Monthly Narrative Report (July), 3 August 1968, CMH.
27. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, July 1968, 6; the Province Senior Advisor, LTC Carl F. Bernard, reported that "The operations of the Joint U.S.-VN task force in Trang Bang and Cu Chi Districts have proven highly successful. The force consists of one U.S. company, a company from the 34th Ranger Battalion (government), and RF and PF units from either Trang Bang or Cu Chi Districts, depending on which area the operations occurs. Such Joint operations have provided excellent experiences and training for district staff officers as well as the RF/PF soldiers."
28. *Ibid.*
29. HQ, III Corps, *Evaluation Report: A Study of Pacification and Security in Cu Chi District, Hau Nghia Province*, 29 May 1968, 2, CMH HPF.
30. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, September 1968, Duc Hoa Subsector, subject: District Monthly Narrative Report for September 68, 5 October 1968.
31. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, September 1968, subject: District Monthly Narrative Report, 30 September 1968. See also, *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, September 1968, 1; *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, September 1968, Duc Hue District, subject: District Monthly Narrative Report, 26 September 1968; *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, November 1968, 1.
32. *Ibid.*, January 1969, 1.
33. *Ibid.*, October 1969, 1; *ibid.*, Duc Hoa District, subject: District Monthly Narrative Report, 31 October 1969.
34. *MACCORDS RAD/R Province Profile*, Hau Nghia, 30 September 1969, 46.
35. Memo for Record, subject: Issue of M16 Rifles to RF/PF, 1, Box 27, RG 472, NARA II.
36. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, January 1969, 2.
37. *Ibid.*, 1.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, February 1969; the HES reports rated villages and hamlets as pacified, contested or under VC control U.S. advisors used a list of different criteria to evaluate the presence and influence of VC and NLF units on the villages and hamlets.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *MACCORDS RAD/R, Province Profile*, Hau Nghia, April-June 1969 and Province Profile, 31 May 1969, CMH.
42. *MACCORDS RAD/R, Province Profiles*, Hau Nghia, 30 September 1969, CMH.
43. Bergerud, 224.
44. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, November 1969, 1.
45. *Ibid.*, December 1969, 2.
46. *Ibid.*, 1.
47. Memo to Province Senior Advisor from District Senior Advisor Cu Chi, subject: Memorandum for record—failure to react in a critical situation by the 36th RF Group Commander, 16 June 1969, Box 30, RG 472, NARA II.
48. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, March 1969, 3.
49. *Ibid.*, May 1969, 1.
50. *Ibid.*, February 1969, 70.
51. *Ibid.*, February 1970, 3.
52. *Ibid.*, March 1970, 1 and 3.
53. *Ibid.*, February 1970, 3.
54. *Ibid.*, October 1970, 1.
55. *Ibid.*, September 1970, 3.
56. *Ibid.*, July 1970, 1.
57. Advisory Team #43, Subject: U.S. Forces Assistance to RF/PF, Box 37, RG 472, NARA II.
58. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, December 1970, 2.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 327. Birtle argues that "The decision by the United States and South Vietnam's other allies to withdraw their combat forces in the early 1970s without having first evicted the North Vietnamese from South Vietnam thus left the Saigon government in an extremely precarious position." Although the government's position in Hau Nghia did not immediately deteriorate, the withdrawal of U.S. forces signaled to both the government and the NLF that it was only a matter of time until the imbalance of forces resulted in the collapse of the government.
61. COL Corbie R. Truman, RF/PF: 1968 (July-December) File, Debriefing Report, 1 August 1968, CMH.
62. C.E. Jordan, 7-9.
63. *Ibid.*
64. COL Amos A. Jordan, Jr., Territorial Security (RF/PF/PSDF): General File, Memorandum for Record: subject: Qualitative Observations on Territorial Security, Annex H to the Report of the USMA Summer Research Team entitled "An Effectiveness Model for Territorial Forces." Compiled by COL Amos A. Jordan, Jr., Professor and Head of the Department of Social Sciences, USMA, October 1969, CMH.
65. *MACCORDS Provincial Report*, February 1969, 70.
66. Bergerud, 306.
67. COL C.E. Jordan, Jr., RF/PF: 1968 (July-December) File, Debriefing Report, 9, CMH.
68. *Ibid.*, 1.