Executive Summary

TITLE: Vietnam: Army Multiplier, The Birth of Airmobility

I. Purpose: To examine the role of the helicopter and airmobility in Vietnam. Airmobility was born in Vietnam--The United States lost that war--Is airmobility suited for combat?

II. Thesis: In Vietnam, Airmobility was a misapplied combat multiplier and as such, a failure to understand the nature of that war. In perspective, airmobility was not the cause of the ultimate defeat of the U.S. national objectives. It did, however, contribute to that defeat.

III. Data: Nothing has done more to multiply the combat power of the Army as the helicopter. It has driven force structure changes and revolutions in tactics. Today's Army Aviation was born in the Vietnam War, a war we lost. Airmobility, synonymous with Vietnam, contributed to that defeat. Unable to carry America to victory in a low-intensity-conflict, the most limited form of war, airmobility is given no place in future wars by military reformers. Airmobility did not cause the American defeat in Vietnam--it did, however, contribute. Too much reliance was placed on airmobility. The move to airmobility was rushed from the beginning. Needing a quick end to the conflict, the Secretary of Defense pushed for a technological answer, disregarding the political and social problems. The Army leadership, blinded by the initial successes of airmobile forces, came to view airmobility the tactic as a strategy. This strategy, highly successful in battles with main forces, removed the Army from the Vietnamese villages, a must in a counterinsurgency war. The American pattern of operations, from basecamp to landing zone, was quickly recognized by the enemy, allowing them to gain control over the pace of the war.

IV. Conclusions: The improper application of airmobility contributed to America's loss in Vietnam. With the political leadership avoiding the social and political problems, and the Army, locked into a body count mentality substituting tactics for strategy, the North Vietnamese were able to control the operational tempo of the war. Unable to defeat the US Army on the battlefield, they conducted a "war of time" against the American will and won.
V. Summary: Not prepared for a counterinsurgency war, the Army's reliance on technology distorted its strategic vision. This misapplication can be forgiven, for the military decisions were made in the heat of battle, and the management of the war effort directed from Washington D.C. Not so easily overlooked are the military reformers' conclusions that the helicopter and airmobility are not suited for combat. This conclusion fixes the failure on a tactic, a part of the whole effort, which was mistakenly utilized as the strategy for prosecuting the war in Vietnam.

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Outline

Thesis Statement: In South Vietnam, Airmobility was a misapplied combat multiplier and as such, an indicator of a failure to understand the nature of the conflict.

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Nothing since the introduction of mechanized forces and the tank in World War I has done more to multiply the combat power of the American Army as has the helicopter. It has driven force structure changes and revolutions in tactical doctrine. Today's Army Aviation was born in the Vietnam War. The helicopter produced a "new mobility" to fight a guerrilla war, yet, like any weapons system it can only be viewed as part of the whole.

The United States lost the war in Vietnam. The national objective of maintaining a friendly non-communist government in South Vietnam was just another strategic failure in light of the North Vietnamese invasion and subsequent fall of Saigon in the Spring of 1975. If the United States lost, then the United States Military failed. Given that the military failed, glaring tactical or strategic errors must have been made upon which the failure can be fixed. The United States enjoyed overwhelming technological and materiel superiority. A look at how the
Army operated in Vietnam revealed "the dominate characteristic as the development of infantry organizations and tactics during the war with increasing emphasis and dependence on airmobile concepts and tactics." (4:31) There it is then! The Army's love affair with the helicopter in Vietnam grew to be a blinding love. The helicopter, and with it, the tactics it generated (airmobility), were not the combat multiplier that the Army thought, but rather a "combat divider." The answer seems so obvious. That magnificent flying machine, synonymous with the Vietnam War, must have, in a large measure, contributed to the United States' defeat. The helicopter was not suited to counterinsurgency warfare.

The death knoll for the helicopter and airmobility has been sounded by numerous military reformers. Tied to Vietnam, unable to carry America to a victory in a low-intensity-conflict, the most limited form of war, the helicopter and airmobility are given no chance of success or survival in any future conflict, especially on a mid to high intensity battlefield. Mr. Bill Lind, renowned Marine Corps reformer, most recently pronounced this position during his address to the Marine Command and Staff College at Quantico, Virginia, in January 1988. As a student in that audience and an Army Aviator, the deductive logic he followed to arrive at his conclusion was hard to swallow, yet sounded convincing. As I pursued this theme, however, something seemed amiss. An argument lodged somewhere in the back of my mind kept tapping on my consciousness. As I read and
researched I found myself surrounded by examples of capabilities that do not support the premature death of Airmobility. A fundamental inconsistency appeared in the reformers' arguments. It is best expressed through a conversation between an American and North Vietnamese Officer. "An American colonel on diplomatic duty in Hanoi remarked to his North Vietnamese counterpart, 'You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.' The North Vietnamese General paused and then responded, 'That may be so, but is also irrelevant.'"(10:573)

The United States Armed Forces were successful in inflicting terrible casualties on the North Vietnamese Forces. As one observer stated, "On the battlefield itself, the United States Forces were unbeatable. In engagement after engagement, the forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were thrown back with terrible losses."(13:1) How then, does one point to an Army tactic and label it a combat divider? The Army won most of the battles. Such success is not found through the use of a combat divider. Airmobility was an effective tactical tool in defeating the enemy forces. General Bruce Palmer has stated, "The direction, conduct, and operational performance during the 1962-1969 period generally were professional and commendable."(11:155) By 1972 the United States and South Vietnamese Forces had defeated the guerrilla insurgency (Viet Cong) to the point that the North Vietnamese were forced to conduct a massive invasion of their own using conventional forces. At two in the morning on the tenth of March 1975, seventeen (17) NVA Divisions began a campaign
that would defeat the South. (14:279) The often overlooked irony of course is that, in the end, the Victor was an invading army, not an internal insurgency force.

Now the entire problem is revealed. Airmobility is accused of not being suited for a counterinsurgency war, while at the same time, the effectiveness of the U.S. Forces in defeating North Vietnamese main forces is repeatedly demonstrated. In the end, however, the Viet Cong insurgency was no longer "a serious contender for power" (14:279) and the NVA main forces had won the victory.

Airmobility then was not a combat divider. In South Vietnam. Airmobility was a misapplied combat multiplier and as such, an indicator of a failure to understand the nature of the conflict. In perspective, airmobility was not the cause of the ultimate defeat of U.S. national objectives. It did, however, contribute to that defeat. Too much reliance was placed on airmobility to achieve the national objectives in Southeast Asia. A highly successful tactic, airmobility became a strategic vision. The U.S. Army had not planned for a war such as the Vietnamese conflict. The rush to airmobility as a tactic, coupled with the immense early success in Vietnam, led to its incorrect application. The overreliance on airmobility demonstrated our faith in technological solutions to what was a military, social, and political problem. Finally, airmobility contributed to the blinding of the Army leadership in Vietnam. That leadership failed to recognize the tactical versus strategic applications of airmobility, as well as the political nature
of the struggle. (1:17)

An analysis of the war in Southeast Asia by Paddy Griffith in his book Forward Into Battle features five distinct campaigns waged by the participants. These campaigns are characterized as:

- The International Political Struggle
- The Strategic Bombing Campaign
- The Interdiction Campaign
- The Main Force Battle
- The Pacification or Village War

The failure of the Army’s leadership to recognize the proper relationship between the village war, the main force war, and the international political struggle are intertwined with the analysis of airmobility. The errors of vision that were made, were at the time, not at all obvious. The Army was "set up" for misapplication and a failure to properly focus its use of airmobility. The airmobility effort was rushed and blinded by initial successes.

The rush to airmobility within the Army began in March of 1960 with the publication of the Rogers Board report. This report provided "essential aviation guidance for development, procurement, and personnel planning and recommended extensive evaluation and testing." (15:9)

Although the helicopter had been utilized during the Korean War, it had been limited to combat support roles for medical evacuation and resupply. Early in 1961, General Maxwell D. Taylor, presidential military advisor, reported after a survey trip to Vietnam that "lack of adequate roads, lines of communication, and means of mobility contribute to the
government's problems in South Vietnam." (15:15) After this impetus, events in Washington occurred with unprecedented speed, and for the first time, a military evolution was managed by the civilian military leadership. In September 1961, then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara directed the Army to restudy its future aviation requirements. Displeased with the resulting report, the third major revision in two years, McNamara directed a "bold new look at land warfare mobility." (15:18) The Secretary called for a "major effort to exploit the aeronautical potential and increase its effectiveness vis-a-vis a ground transportation system." (15:18) This tasking called for results in terms of cost effectiveness and directed that field tests and exercises be conducted. There should be "no veto or dilution by conservative views." (15:18) The race was on. The United States Army, an organization of mechanized and "leg infantry" divisions would become airmobile.

In December of 1961, 400 men and 32 H-21 helicopters of the 57th and 8th Transportation Companies participated in Operation Chopper, the first tactical operation involving the air movement of combat troops into battle. Approximately 1000 South Vietnamese paratroopers were airlifted into a Viet Cong headquarters where they captured a radio facility from a surprised enemy. (15:3)

The Army study on airmobility in a conventional role was completed in August of 1962 with the Howze Board Report. The Howze Report concluded that the shift to airmobility was "inevitable, just as was that from animal mobility to
motor." (15:24) Secretary McNamara was given his newest technological invention, the Airmobile Division. Trucks were reduced from 3452 to 1100 and helicopters were increased from 100 to 459. (15:22) Had a veto or diluting view been allowed, the Secretary might have taken notes from a Viet Cong manual captured in 1962 outlining the disadvantages of airmobile tactics:

- Operations separate forces from population
- Separation from villages retains insurgency infrastructure
- Necessarily small forces lifted can be counterattacked
- Enemy strike elements are unfamiliar with terrain
- Easily surrounded and defeated
- Ambushes easily employed against landings (15:27)

The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the Army's first airmobile division, was activated on 1 July 1965 after a tentative decision in March of that year (the steamroller to airmobility was in gear). (15:61) One month later, elements of the 1st Cavalry Division (1st Cav) were in Vietnam. Airmobility was envisioned as the combat multiplier that would cut the force ratios required for counterinsurgency operations from 10-15 to 1 to 4 to 1. (6:157) (A strategic implication before the first tactical engagement) The opportunity for the first test of the 1st Cav and airmobility came during the Battle of the Ia Drang, which quickly demonstrated the vulnerabilities of the new "American way of war" as well as its strengths.

LTC Harold G. Moore's 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry was airlifted into a small clearing near the Ia Drang.
General Giap's NVA Division detected the insertion, and he ordered two of his regiments, the 66th and 33rd, to quickly encircle and eliminate the Americans. As LTC Moore sent one of his companies out to a supporting position, the Americans ran into the NVA troops positioning to attack the landing zone. This accidental encounter probably saved the 1/7th from annihilation, and the ensuing battle raged for two days. Properly warned, LTC Moore's Battalion fought off numerous human wave assaults, decimating the two attacking regiments. As the survivors of these two regiments and the rest of the committed NVA division attempted to withdraw toward the border, five South Vietnamese battalions were airlifted into blocking positions astride their escape routes. Caught in a trap, the unsuspecting NVA were annihilated by American artillery and the South Vietnamese battalions. (12:116-131)

The Battle for the Ia Drang had been a dramatic success. Airmobility had made a glorious entrance. "As an example, artillery batteries displaced sixty-seven times and still managed to fire 33,108 rounds!" (12:130) The NVA, committing a division of regulars with the expectation of cutting South Vietnam in half had been decimated by one airmobile battalion. (10:548)

"The political and military leaders of the United States were buoyed by the superb performance of the first Marine and Army battalions that met the NVA." (10:552) General Westmoreland stated, "The ability of the Americans to meet and defeat the best troops the enemy could put on
the field of battle was once more demonstrated beyond any possible doubt, as was the validity of the Army's airmobility concept." (6:169) What was overlooked were the vulnerabilities and weaknesses inherent in the plight of LTC Moore's 1/7 Cavalry on the Ia Drang. Once dismounted from the aircraft, his forces had no mobility. American units developed the pattern of tying themselves to their landing zones. They would not leave the security of the air lifeline. The initiative belonged to the enemy. He could maneuver, fight, or withdraw as he chose. On the Ia Drang, the 1st Cav engaged an enemy unfamiliar with airmobility or the dangers of massing in the face of overwhelming American firepower. The NVA and Viet Cong forces were quick to adapt. Airmobility's utility on the battlefield was considerable as future operations would show. It provided a "Sunday Punch of unequalled flexibility and versatility." (11:156) But that "Sunday Punch" had to be set up, the location and timing carefully selected. Instead, "it came to dominate American tactical thinking and to dictate the very manner of fighting." (11:180)

Where soldiers walked, they had to stay close to planned landing zones (LZs) to insure casualty pickup and resupply. When inserted by air, troops were forced to travel light—too light to survive without an air LOC. This in turn necessitated leaving combat troops behind to guard the precious LZ after each insertion. The enemy forces seized on the American pattern and took control over the tempo of the war. As Sir Robert Thompson observed, "you were never mobile on your feet. The enemy, who was mobile
on his feet, could actually decide whether he was going to have a battle with you in the first place, and he would break it off whenever he wanted to." (14:178) The enemy could then move from main force war to guerrilla war at his will. The United States continued to fight a main force war. Once substantial enemy forces were located, airmobile forces were quickly inserted into the area with outstanding results. However, once the surviving enemy broke contact, the Americans withdrew to their firebases and basecamps, and the enemy could move with impunity throughout the villages and countryside. This insistence on fighting the "American way of war" was not nearly flexible enough. As Professor Earl Ravenal noted in Lessons of Vietnam "... it requires the appropriate target." (14:256) Despite this misapplication, the reliance on the "American way of war" even when the target was not appropriate, the US Army was, according to many measures, successful. This dilemma cannot be ignored. Tactical mobility and firepower contributed to an 8 to 1 kill ratio of NVA and Viet Cong to American and South Vietnamese soldiers. (13:110) There must be another side to the story.

In October 1967, Secretary of Defense McNamara visited Vietnam. He departed sobered and reported that the "enemy has adopted a strategy of keeping us busy and waiting us out." (6:183) The Army, with its one year tours, body count mentality, and habit of "lunging into areas of marginal political importance," was demonstrating a lack of understanding of both the "village war" and the
international political struggle. (6:122) In 1968, only
80,000 of 543,000 soldiers in Vietnam were combat troops.
The rest constituted the massive logistical tail needed to
conduct an airmobile war while maintaining the American way
of life in Vietnam. (1:6-10) With most of these combat
troops dedicated to searching out and destroying enemy main
forces, the United States did not have the assets to conduct
or even learn the nature of the counterinsurgency
war. (6:197) General Westmoreland felt that he could endure
less than the ideal force structures and conditions because
he was sure victory would be ours eventually. General
Westmoreland was wrong. The war was being fought for time,
not space or body counts. While the United States stuck to
its style of war, the enemy could control not only his own
casualty rate, but that of the American forces as
well. (6:122) Through the control of the casualty rate, the
will of the American people could be exploited. If the
press reported to the American people that the Army was
winning, the NVA and Viet Cong only had to join a few
battles and inflict a few casualties to turn the Antiwar
heat back up in America. With no strategy to control area
or be involved on a large scale with the villages, the US
Army missed the opportunity to see the war for what it was.
An Airmobility strategy, not airmobile tactics was partially
responsible for this failure. "As one airmobile commander
ruefully stated after the war, 'We should have done less
flittin and more sittin."")(14:88)

The North Vietnamese did not miss the impact of their
control over the initiative and casualty rates. The
Americans and South Vietnamese were able to destroy the insurgency by 1968 (thus eliminating the Viet Cong as a contender for power in 1972 and 1975) because the North Vietnamese were willing to sacrifice the guerrilla to win the international political struggle at TET. Not only had General Westmoreland failed to recognize the conflict as a war of time against the American will, he had also failed to understand the willingness of the North Vietnamese to take terrible punishment.

In retrospect, the United States' reliance on technology and the substitution of tactics such as airmobility and firepower for strategic efforts were contributing factors to the prolonging of the war, and thus the loss of the war. We allowed the enemy to set the pace. In so doing, we saved American lives. "That the fewer casualties may have been entirely wasted does not occur to the many." (12:184) One more seldom considered effect of the American way of war in Vietnam was its cumulative effect on the people of South Vietnam. The long years of indiscriminate high technology warfare and the suffering it inflicted did much to undermine the efforts of the South Vietnamese government (corrupt as it was) (3:112) to win the allegiance of its people. (8:403) Dr. Andrew F. Krepepinevich, in The Army and Vietnam, best illustrates the effect of our stereotyped and ritualized successes in operations and tactics:

If the Army had followed a counterinsurgency strategy, both the human and financial costs of the war would have been significantly lower. This in turn would have assisted to some extent in
maintaining popular support within the United States for American participation in the war. It would have placed the Army in a position to sustain its efforts in a conflict environment certain to produce a protracted war. True to its concept, the Army focused on technological and logistical dimensions of strategy while ignoring the political and social dimensions that formed the foundation of the counterinsurgency warfare. (6:233)

The improper utilization and overreliance on airmobile tactics by the United States contributed to--but did not cause--the Vietnam defeat. Not prepared for a counterinsurgency war, the Army's reliance on technology distorted its strategic vision. This misapplication can be forgiven, for the military decisions were made in the heat of battle, and the management of the war effort directed from Washington D.C. Not so easily overlooked, however, are the conclusions being drawn by the military reformers. Extracted from 13 years of sterile academic evaluation after the war, they arrive at a flawed conclusion--that the helicopter and airmobility are not suited for combat. This conclusion fixes the failure on a tactic, a part of the whole effort, which was mistakenly utilized as the strategy for prosecuting the war effort. The military leadership of the United States Armed Forces have recognized and corrected their error. It's time the reformers did the same, and examine airmobility in its true context. Airmobility is not a strategy--it is a tactic of maneuver--a combat multiplier as part of the combined arms team. Viewed in this correct context, Airmobility is a dynamic success--the Vietnam battle results speak for themselves.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


