



# INTELLIGENCE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

## PART 1 OF 4



*Signals Intelligence Collection. An E-1 Tracer, which is a flying radar platform, lands aboard the USS Enterprise (CVN-65). United States Navy personnel flew many intelligence collection missions over Southeast Asia. All five Services contributed to the intelligence effort throughout the Vietnam War. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

### INTRODUCTION

Sound military and political decisions depend upon timely, accurate, adequate and useable intelligence. The intelligence process is a continuous cycle, of planning, collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data. Intelligence must be timely and accurate. It includes, but is not limited to, knowledge of the enemy's history, people, customs, languages, weapons, equipment, tactics, and the strategy of their leaders.

Intelligence agencies in Vietnam strove to provide accurate and timely intelligence to military commanders and civilian decision makers. These organizations, agencies, units, and teams pioneered new methods of operation, refined the intelligence cycle, and left an indelible legacy on the future of the U.S. civilian and military intelligence community for years to come.

Though intelligence goals remained consistent throughout the war, these organizations and their operations changed significantly as U.S. involvement in Vietnam wore on. This poster series focuses on intelligence organizations at their peak operation during the war. American intelligence operations were vital to the success of combat operations; and civilian and military intelligence personnel efforts were pivotal to the development of modern intelligence operations, policy, and doctrine.

### MILITARY INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATIONS

#### Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) conducted and coordinated U.S. intelligence operations using organic intelligence assets. As the war progressed, MACV consolidated outside efforts to eliminate redundancies and further streamline intelligence operations. Working with South Vietnam, MACV created the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, the Combined Materiel Exploitation Center, and the Combined Military Interrogation Center to supplement its own efforts. These organizations fell under U.S. and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff.

#### Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam

MACV created the Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam (CICV), an intelligence conglomerate to compile and disseminate military intelligence. CICV possessed decentralized operating sections to streamline the intelligence process through a hierarchy. Stove piping the missions of the operating sections maximized resources while minimizing redundancies, although some overlap did occur. CICV consolidated intelligence for MACV, taking it from the other combined centers, as well as subordinate combat units, and processing it for MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff.

CICV had two Order of Battle (OB) offices to document the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong: a Ground OB section, with five teams assigned to geographic areas; and a Political OB section, with seven teams assigned by military regions. The Ground and Political

OBs gathered intelligence on individual unit composition, disposition, strength, combat effectiveness, tactics, training, logistics and other important military information. CICV's Technical Intelligence section analyzed captured weapon systems to instruct U.S. forces on Vietnamese communist capabilities.

#### Enemy Weapons and Equipment

*North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces mostly relied upon the Chinese and Soviets for their weapons and equipment. Some communist fighters used American and French-made holdovers from World War II, or the colonial wars against the French. The Viet Cong constructed improvised booby-traps and homemade mines out of discarded junk as well.*

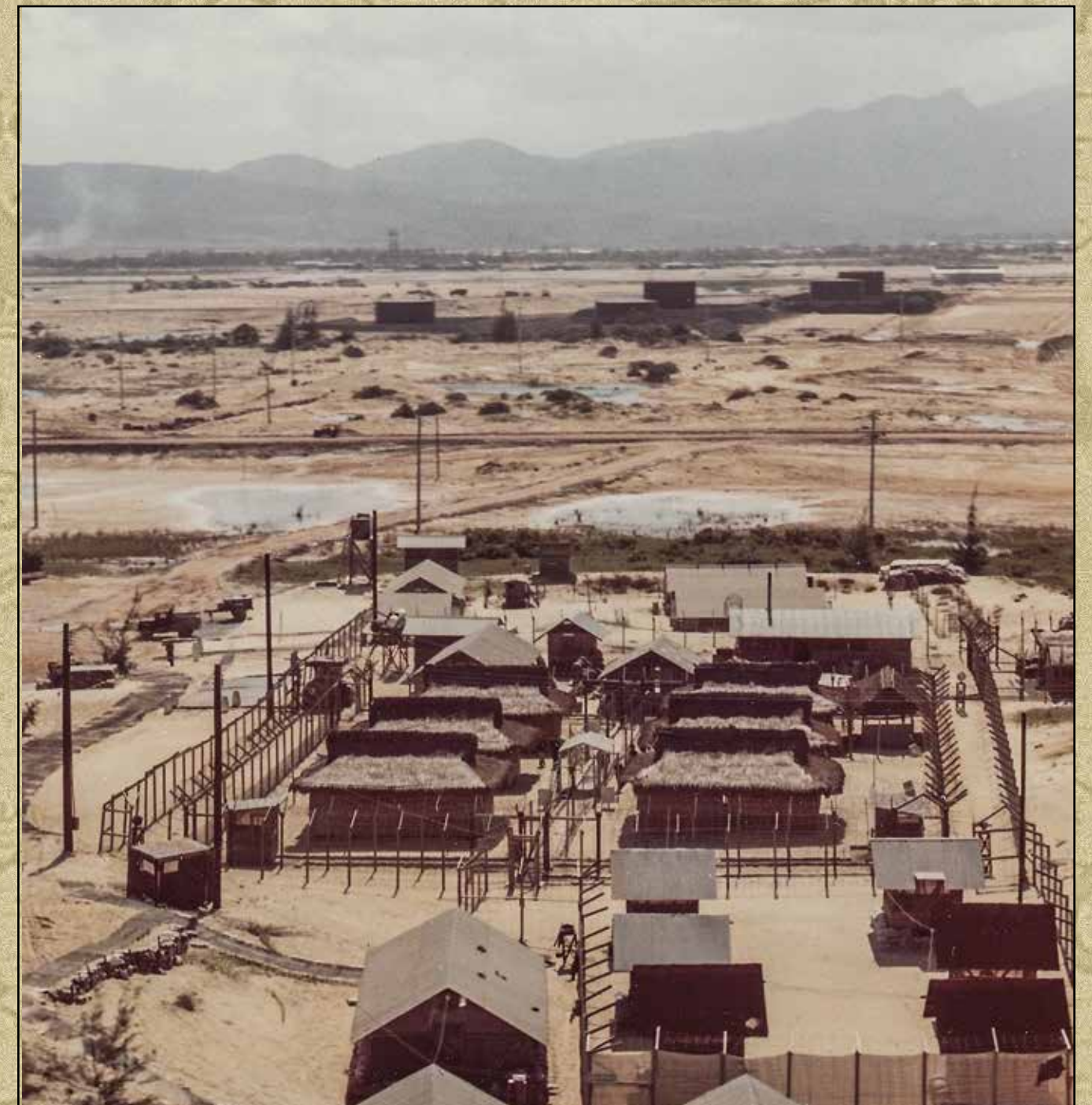


*Display of Captured Weapons. These rocket rounds, mortar rounds, ammo, grenades, and rocket launchers were captured by South Vietnamese Army troops. Friendly forces then examined the captured enemy weapons in detail. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

#### Combined Materiel Exploitation Center

MACV created the Combined Materiel Exploitation Center (CMEC) in 1965 to analyze the Communist's use of increasingly sophisticated arms and equipment. The CMEC conducted the initial analysis of everything "materiel," from missiles, to tanks, to handguns. CMEC's analysis of intelligence operations included performance limitations, from which military countermeasures were developed. CMEC then passed the necessary information to CICV to develop publications for U.S. forces prior to their arrival in Vietnam.

Armed with this intelligence, the CICV Technical Intelligence branch created courses on enemy techniques that included topics such as the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong's construction and use of booby-traps, and the types and capabilities of their military equipment. These courses prepared soldiers for the dangers they were likely to face in Vietnam.



*POW Collection Points. The process of receiving, fingerprinting, interrogating, and classifying prisoners of war and other detained personnel was initially carried out at POW Collection Points, before detainees were forwarded to the Combined Military Interrogation Center. This photo shows the Chu Lai POW Collection Point in 1968. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

#### Combined Military Interrogation Center

The Combined Military Interrogation Center (CMIC) acquired human intelligence from prisoners of war, and from those who defected to the government of South Vietnam; defectors (or Hoi Chanh) were individuals who defected. Captured prisoners of war normally flowed from the capturing unit to the brigade or division detention areas for interrogation. Hoi Chanh were usually transferred to the nearest Chieu Hoi center as captives, but were given special treatment. Hoi Chanh were housed in separate dormitories, and endured few restrictions. The level of interrogation was determined by the prisoner's knowledge and the importance of their information. Most expected torture, and were surprised when CMIC's interrogators treated the prisoners well, to earn their trust.

CMIC was designated the location for interrogation of individuals likely to possess intelligence of the greatest value. As the war progressed, U.S. intelligence created numerous interrogation centers throughout Vietnam to address the increasingly large volume of enemy prisoners.



*POWs provided human intelligence. Tagged Viet Cong prisoners await transportation and interrogation. Tactical units usually forwarded prisoners to a central location for interrogation. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

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# INTELLIGENCE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

## PART 2 OF 4



*Civilian Irregular Defense Group. CIDG forces, seen here conducting a search and clear operation, regularly contributed to intelligence by capturing equipment and documents in the field. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

### CIVILIAN AGENCIES

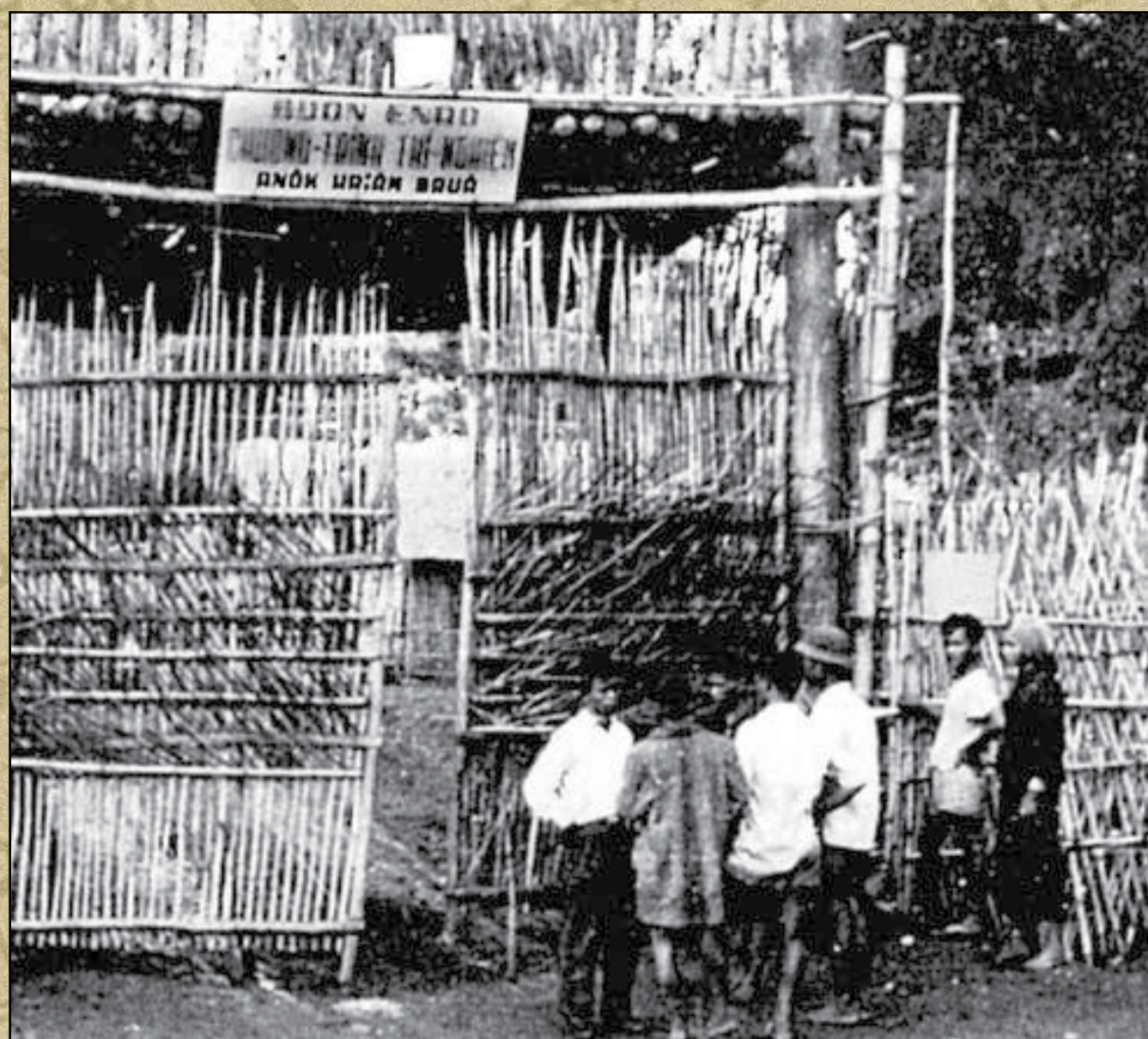
Civilian intelligence agencies from the United States in Southeast Asia, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA), worked alongside their military counterparts to deepen military and political decision makers' knowledge of the local and strategic situation in South Vietnam.

The CIA and NSA played a vital role in the Vietnam War. Government civilians were often co-located with military personnel, and shared danger with their military counterparts. Many lived among the native population with little protection. Since government civilians tended to stay in Vietnam longer than their military counterparts did, they tended to form stronger relationships with the South Vietnamese.

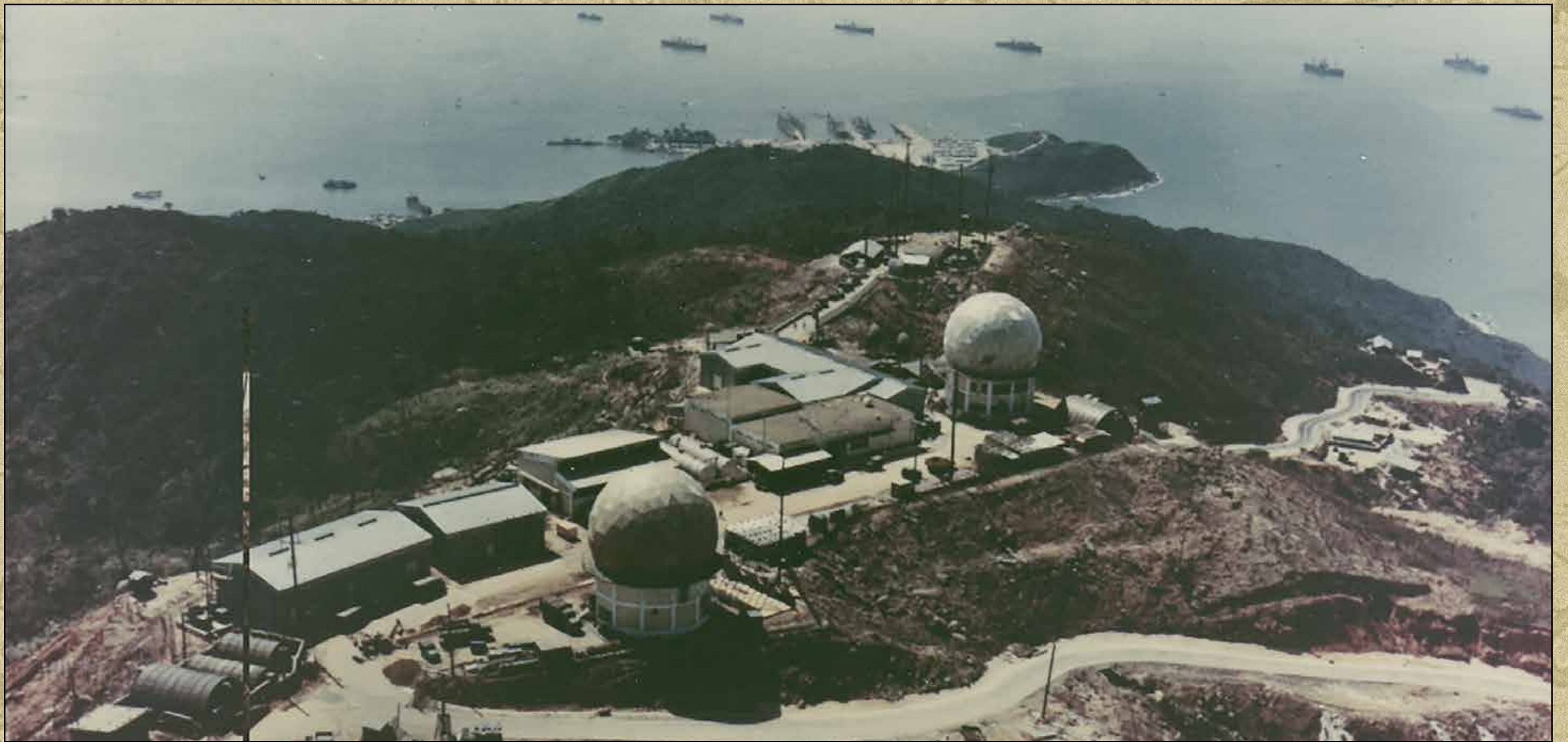
### CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

MACV and CIA intelligence priorities differed across Southeast Asia. Though unity was never fully achieved, and competition between the two threaded the war, some cooperation and coordination evolved over time.

The CIA worked closely with militant civilian organizations such as Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs), Combat Youth, and Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) to collect intelligence. CIDGs were typically made up of recruits from various ethnic groups, especially the indigenous Montagnard peoples of the mountain regions. The Combat Youth consisted of Vietnamese Catholics, mostly across southern South Vietnam. PRUs were primarily made up of local South Vietnamese villagers. Collectively, these organizations gathered intelligence and trained South Vietnam's population in local defense.



*Birth of the CIDG. Gate to Buon Enao in 1962, the first CIDG village. The success of Buon Enao led to the continuation of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program. (Courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency)*



*Signals Intelligence Collection. The Monkey Mountain Facility, a SIGINT site. (Courtesy of Earl Morgan)*

CIDGs, Combat Youth, and PRUs collected intelligence on enemy activity near their villages. Because they operated in the countryside where the Viet Cong were strongest, their intelligence primarily centered on these communist insurgents.

U.S. Special Forces personnel paired with and trained South Vietnamese forces in reconnaissance and patrolling. Aggressive patrolling often gleaned the size of Viet Cong units operating in the area, and the likelihood of attack. Gathered intelligence was sent to local Special Forces personnel, CIA officers, and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). CIDGs, Combat Youth, and PRUs rooted out Viet Cong political and military organizers throughout South Vietnam, and their teams built relationships that facilitated the collection of intelligence from villagers not involved in the programs. Human intelligence was vital to defeating the Viet Cong in the villages where they operated. A CIA officer remarked, "We worked with members of our unit who lived in these villages. These organizations overcame language barriers between U.S. personnel and natives to complete their objectives. As one U.S. service member and Phoenix Program advisor to a PRU put it, "the language barrier was difficult and frustrating...so I had to learn Vietnamese...you learn to survive in it and learning to communicate is one of the first things you have to do." Owing to the success of local and indigenous intelligence gathering programs, MACV incorporated a number of CIA programs under its control.



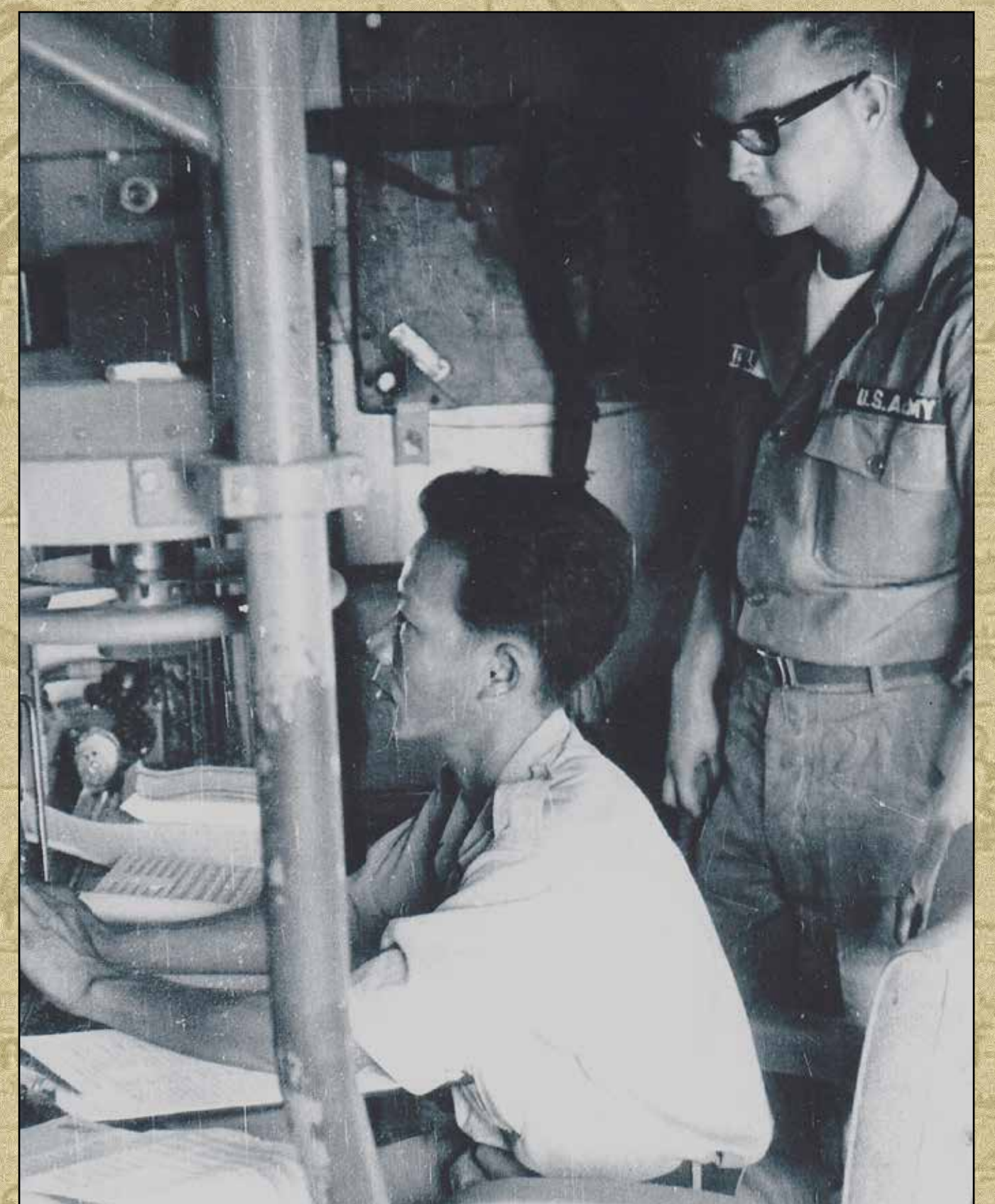
*Provincial Reconnaissance Units. A PRU team, based out of Duc Pho, and their American advisors pose for a group photograph in 1970. (Courtesy of Roger Jordbeim)*

#### Phoenix Program

One intelligence collection program was the Phoenix Program. Supported by both MACV and the CIA; its name stemmed from the mythological birds found in East Asian folklore known as Phuon Hoang. The South Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units played a significant role in the Phoenix Program. They were specifically tasked with finding and neutralizing the Viet Cong cadre and their sympathizers. The PRU's preferred method was to capture and interrogate Viet Cong insurgents. Still highly controversial today because of its association with assassinations, a CIA participant in the Phoenix Program noted, "It's not in your interest to kill anybody, because dead people don't talk. So, our primary objective was to capture, and interrogate, and exploit for information." At the height of Phoenix Program, 1968 to 1972, PRUs exploited information from more than 67,000 Viet Cong personnel to neutralize the effectiveness of the Viet Cong in the South.

### NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

The National Security Agency (NSA) deployed electronic intelligence and communications intelligence in signals intelligence (SIGINT) operations. The Army's Security Agency (ASA), which also focused on signals intelligence, fell under the director of the NSA. NSA civilians accompanied army personnel at ASA facilities throughout the Vietnam War, and accompanied army personnel, and both military and civilian personnel faced great danger as the enemy regularly targeted the sites.



*Intelligence Advisors. A member of the 3rd Radio Research Unit looks over the shoulder of a Vietnamese Army direction-finding specialist, symbolic of ASA's advisory role in the war prior to 1965. (U.S. Army photo)*

#### Signals Intelligence

Gen. Arthur S. Collins, commander of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division operating near the Cambodian border in 1966, said, "in our area, we couldn't possibly find the enemy physically if he didn't want to be found. Special Intelligence, the cover name for SIGINT was the best indication of his location. There is absolutely no question as to its great value."

ASA and NSA personnel, with assistance from U.S. airpower, intercepted Viet Cong and North Vietnamese communications regularly. The National Security Agency provided career cryptologists to analyze these intercepted communications. In 1970, there were 8,500 American cryptologists in Vietnam, and they played a significant role in assisting interdiction efforts on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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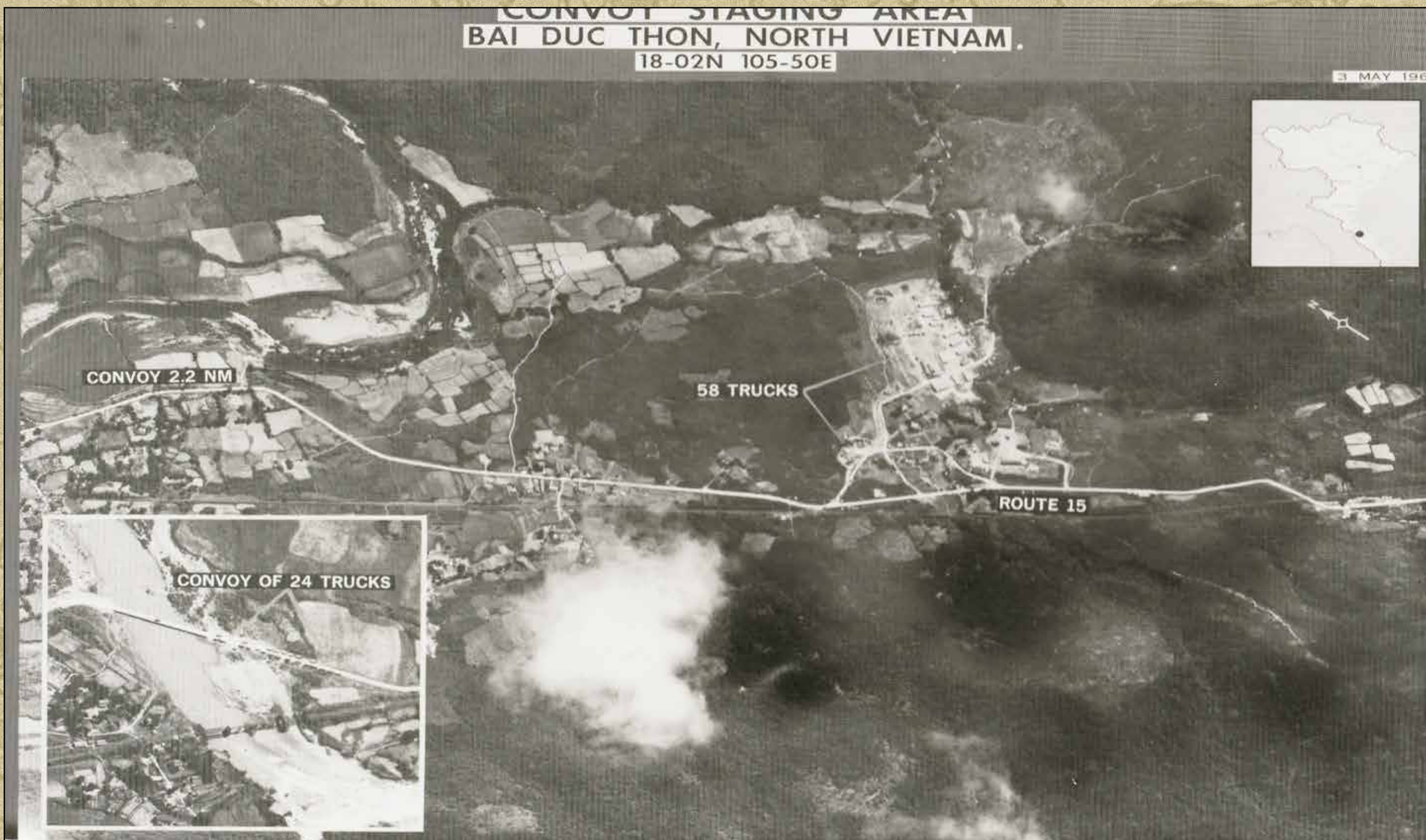


# INTELLIGENCE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

## PART 3 OF 4



Electronic Intelligence Collection. An aircrewman plots radar sightings by radar technicians aboard an Air Force EC-121 Warning Star aircraft. (Courtesy of the National Archives)



Processed Imagery. Politicians and military commanders both relied on aerial reconnaissance imagery throughout the war. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara presented this aerial reconnaissance image to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to show a convoy staging area in Laos in early 1964. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

### ELECTRONIC INTELLIGENCE

Electronic intelligence (ELINT) intercepted radar and navigation signals to determine the Communists' location and capabilities. Most ELINT came from U.S. airpower conducting operations over North Vietnamese airspace. The U.S. Navy also collected electronic intelligence from the coast of North Vietnam. ELINT operations conducted near North Vietnam were closer to the signals' points of origin; this aided interception and exploitation.

Electronic intelligence proved valuable against North Vietnamese air defense systems relying on radar to target United States and allied aircraft. U.S. pilots used ELINT to determine the capabilities of enemy defenses and their location.

### COMMUNICATIONS INTELLIGENCE

Communication intelligence (COMINT) derived from interception and analysis of phone calls and radio transmissions. U.S. forces wiretapped enemy landlines, an act akin to adding listening devices to a phone line. Wiretaps were convenient due to their simplicity but the effort required continuous attention and concentration of U.S. personnel. U.S. personnel became so proficient at intercepting and processing enemy communications that parts of the process had to be automated in order to keep up with the volume of intelligence collection.

Recognizing the opportunity the language barrier afforded them; Communists often used unsecure methods to communicate. One American soldier recounted, "I sat there for two weeks with earphones on and a notebook transcribing clear text French." Since much of Indochina was a former French colony, the language was common.

Communications intelligence collection became more difficult when Communists encrypted their messages with codes and cyphers. They further added complexity to their codes and cyphers by assigning them to specific Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units. Moreover, cyphers and codes were regularly replaced or changed. Each time a change took place, U.S. personnel began the decrypting process anew. Intelligence is perishable, and codebreaking is time consuming, which caused delays in processing intercepted communications, thus limiting the value of the intelligence.

#### Chieu Hoi

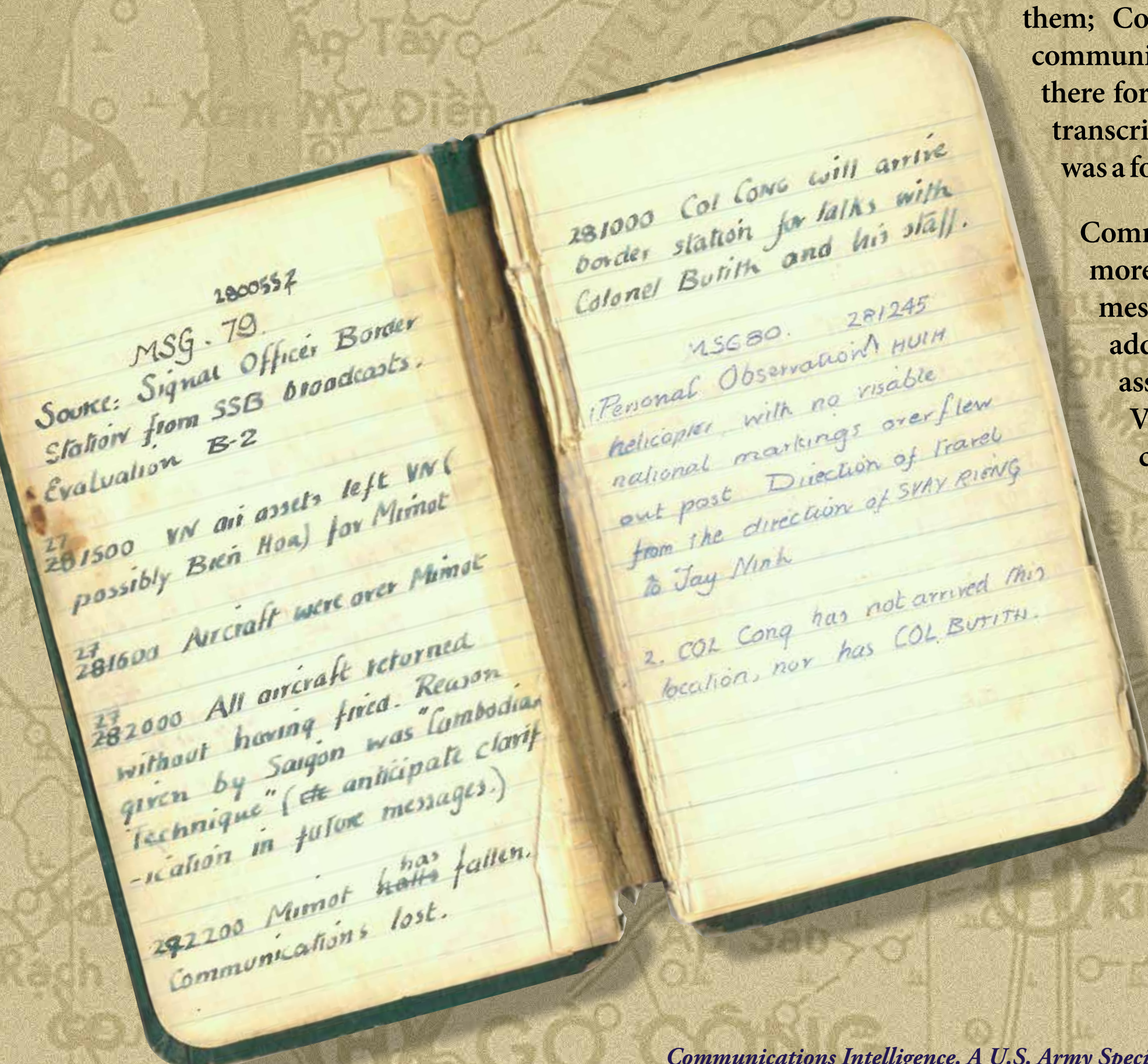
The Chieu Hoi Program encouraged defections among Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army troops. The psychological operation used leaflets and radio broadcasts. Roughly translated to Open Arms in English, Hoi Chanhs, or ralliers to the Chieu Hoi Program received education, financial compensation, and reunification with their family as incentives. For their part, the U.S. and South Vietnamese benefited from intelligence provided. Many enemy troops "rallied" during the war; over 47,000 Hoi Chanhs in 1969 alone, and an estimated 200,000 from 1963 to 1972.

### AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE

All services flew aerial reconnaissance missions. These missions identified the location and intent of communist forces. Aircraft equipped with side-looking airborne radar were effective at detecting nighttime enemy movement on roads and rivers. Side-looking airborne radar allowed U.S. aircraft fly alongside roads and rivers, instead of directly above them, to observe movement. Aircraft also dropped seismic and auditory sensors into the jungle to detect enemy movement. From the aircraft, personnel also directly photographed enemy positions, movements, and other activity.

Cameras were mounted to reconnaissance-specific platforms, such as the OV-1 Mohawk, the SR-71 Blackbird, and the U-2 Dragon Lady aircraft, or hand-carried by airborne forward air controllers. U.S. policy makers and senior military commanders relied heavily upon intelligence captured through these means in their decision-making throughout the war.

Cartographers also used aerial photographs to revise and replace the obsolete French topographic maps of Vietnam used during America's early involvement in the region. Though aerial reconnaissance was a source of vital intelligence, it required constant updating as enemy forces relocated or reinforced their positions.



Communications Intelligence. A U.S. Army Special Forces officer used this notebook to draft reports of his observations and intercepted radio transmissions broadcast unencrypted in French by communists along the Ho Chi Minh trail on the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border in 1970. (Courtesy of retired U.S. Army Colonel Denny Lane)

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*Interrogation. A detainee listens to Biem Vu Thu interpreting for Nathan Hale in the interrogation room of the Americal Division prisoner of war collection point. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*



*Intelligence Dissemination. Replacement troops receive training on the Viet Cong's use of mines and booby-traps. Following nine hours of instruction, troops were required to navigate a booby-trapped course. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

### INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION

Intelligence collection during the Vietnam War was vital to the war effort and faced numerous challenges owing to language barriers and its time sensitive nature. The U.S. primarily relied on South Vietnamese translators. Collected intelligence was not processed at the source of collection, and required transmission for further processing, which was time consuming. Supplying intelligence analysts with information sometimes meant rushing the collection process. In order to satisfy information requests in a timely manner while maintaining the integrity of the information, intelligence personnel corroborated information from as many sources as possible.

Experimental technology was sometimes used to automate, expedite, or simplify the collection process, but reconnaissance operations collecting information behind enemy lines were crucial. During one ground combat mission, a soldier recalled "What they found was – a map that showed every logistics support base on the Ho Chi Minh Trail...about one hundred miles of the trail." Instances like these provided significant intelligence, but only after hard work in determining the value and meaning of collected intelligence.

The Americans occasionally mitigated the language barrier with technological advancements. One airman described a device called an "elephant counter" used by indigenous reconnaissance personnel transmitting troop and vehicle movements on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, "The teams had little black boxes that were about the size of an Army Walkie-Talkie, but it didn't have numbers on it, it had trucks and little stick figures for people."

### INTELLIGENCE PROCESSING

Once intelligence was collected, it was then processed and analyzed to determine its significance. Once analyzed, intelligence was then developed into products for dissemination.

Verified intelligence was then assessed for its potential value based on the priority of the Intelligence Requirements Listing. Analysts would cross-reference intelligence reports against those previously received to develop products.

The process of confirming intelligence reports was time consuming and required attention to detail. To be effective, intelligence analysts pulled data from multiple sources. As one analyst put it, "A little bit here doesn't mean very much by itself, but if you put that little bit with this little bit with the other little bit; it really starts building a picture for you." In some instances, intelligence might not be of immediate use but prove valuable later.

Regardless of its need to be translated, all intelligence posed challenges. Photos and imagery had to be developed before they could be analyzed to determine their value. Electronic intelligence needed to be interpreted and then plotted on situation maps prior to distribution to those who needed it. Situation maps were covered in acetate, and grease pencils were used to mark unit locations. Situation maps enabled local commanders to concentrate combat patrols near suspected enemy units.

Intelligence analysts worked around the clock to process thousands of documents and reports to piece together actionable information for a positive effect on the battlefield.

*Language Barrier Mitigation. A Hark Box, affectionately called an Elephant Counter, "...the size of an Army walkie-talkie..." transmitted data to overhead aircraft. (Courtesy of CIA)*



#### Language Barrier

*The complexity of languages created difficulties for intelligence personnel. Chinese was frequently used across Southeast Asia due to the region's proximity to China, and the region's long history of resisting Chinese incursion. The use of French owed to Indochina's once colonial position. In addition to Chinese, Vietnamese, French, and English, there were also approximately two dozen ethnic groups that each spoke their own language.*



*Combined Document Exploitation Center. In the CDEC, Vietnamese civilians and U.S. military evaluate captured enemy field documents. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

### DISSEMINATION OF INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence dissemination was a crucial step in the intelligence cycle; until it was disseminated to decision makers and units in combat, collected intelligence had zero effect on friendly forces. Only once it was disseminated could it be used to the benefit of U.S. and allied forces.

#### Publications

*The Department of Defense created numerous publications during the war on topics such as Viet Cong withdrawal tactics, Viet Cong weapons retrieval from battlefields, and Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army night operations. Publications drew from many intelligence sources, especially captured equipment. A few examples: The Department of the Army Pamphlet 381-10 Weapons and Equipment Recognition Guide (Southeast Asia) provided information on weapons and equipment used in Southeast Asia. The Department of the Army Pamphlet 381-11 Guide to Viet Cong Booby-traps & Explosive Devices taught service members the dangers of improvised enemy hazards. Both were updated several times throughout the Vietnam War.*

Specialists transformed vetted intelligence into instructional products. The Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam mailed these products directly to commanders, service schools, and intelligence organizations. In some cases, it was simple for analysts to deliver what individual units required. In instances where information would benefit a broader military audience, such as descriptions of enemy weapons and equipment, publications were produced. Specialists deemed some publications important enough to be mailed to commanders in the field automatically.

Intelligence disseminated to combat units allowed them to take action with fire missions, close air support missions in support of ground combat units, or even the insertion of special operations forces or quick reaction forces to engage or further observe enemy units.

### LEGACY

Vietnam's decentralized intelligence efforts gave the modern American military "lessons learned" that, in the years following, saw streamlining, centralizing, and cross talk among various intelligence agencies. These lessons from the Vietnam War continue to drive developments in intelligence techniques and procedures today. Our engagements with the Viet Cong also provided a template to understand modern violent extremist organizations. In countering the Viet Cong, a CIA officer reminisced, "We took actionable intelligence and linked it to the strike force, which is now the centerpiece of counterterrorism operations in the U.S., everywhere."

The legacy of American intelligence operations can be seen across today's integrated intelligence community. Department of Defense agencies participate in this multidiscipline effort to facilitate information sharing among Combatant Commanders, interagency partners, and law enforcement organizations, while continuing to shape the future of intelligence operations. The Defense Intelligence Agency coordinates and integrates the efforts of intelligence organizations, ensuring that the organizations pool intelligence for their mutual benefit to mitigate or eliminate the challenges with intelligence coordination that occurred during the Vietnam War. That integration and coordination has had significant positive effects within the intelligence community.

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