

## Chapter 4

# Fighting Against Guerrillas: The Strategic Hamlet Program

**T**his chapter will describe a program designed to help beat Ho Chi Minh's Vietcong – the communist guerrilla organization attempting to overthrow the Diem government.

The program was called the Strategic Hamlet Program. The idea behind it was to get South Vietnamese into special villages so they could protect themselves against the Vietcong (known as the VC). The reader will learn about the program, its purpose, and about one village, An Loc, that was taken over by the VC. Readers will be asked whether to order an air attack against the village in order to drive the VC out.

### **Vietminh Become the Vietcong**

It should be recalled that Ngo Dinh Diem decided not to hold the national elections to unite North and South Vietnam called for by the Geneva Accord. The promised elections that were supposed to have been held in June of 1956 were never held.

In the meantime, Diem tried to gain control of hundreds of villages by appointing chiefs loyal to him. He also removed people in the villages that may have fought for the Vietminh in the war against France. As reported in Chapter 3, thousands of suspected Vietminh and their suspected sympathizers were rounded up. With the exception of a few men in each village, Diem's wide net came close to catching all of the Vietminh left in South Vietnam.

The Vietminh had expected to win South Vietnam by free elections. Because Diem decided not to hold these elections, Ho gave the word that the armed resistance would begin. In order to achieve the victory for which he dedicated his life, Ho realized that his followers would have to fight, not vote. Slowly Ho's followers got themselves organized again. They decided to call themselves the National Liberation Front to emphasize the fact they were fighting for a united Vietnam. The Diem government said they were the Vietnamese Communists (Vietcong or VC.)

### **Guerrilla Warfare: Stages 1 and 2**

The VC often came into villages to recruit people to fight on their side. These recruiting missions would often start with a few 'get acquainted' visits to get to know the people and their problems. Occasionally the VC would help people in a village who did not have enough food to feed their families they might help plant or harvest crops, dig irrigation ditches, or supply seeds. They also encouraged people to share their grievances against local officials, greedy landlords, or corrupt merchants, who were blamed for all their problems

But the Vietcong did not always come to a village to do some noble deed. They might show their power by killing an unpopular local leader who had been appointed by Ngo Dinh Diem, or by ridding the area of a particularly wealthy and unpopular landlord or by terrorizing a popular leader to discourage others from siding with the government of South Vietnam.

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Using many different methods, the Vietcong proved that they could do whatever they wanted in the villages. They could be helpful, and they could kill people who did not cooperate with them. They had more power than the South Vietnamese government because they were able to take over almost any village at almost any given time.

The Vietcong did more than recruit peasants to side with them against Diem's government. They attacked police stations, blew up bridges, ambushed South Vietnamese soldiers, and destroyed government buildings. Diem had a real revolution on his hands that threatened to destroy his government.

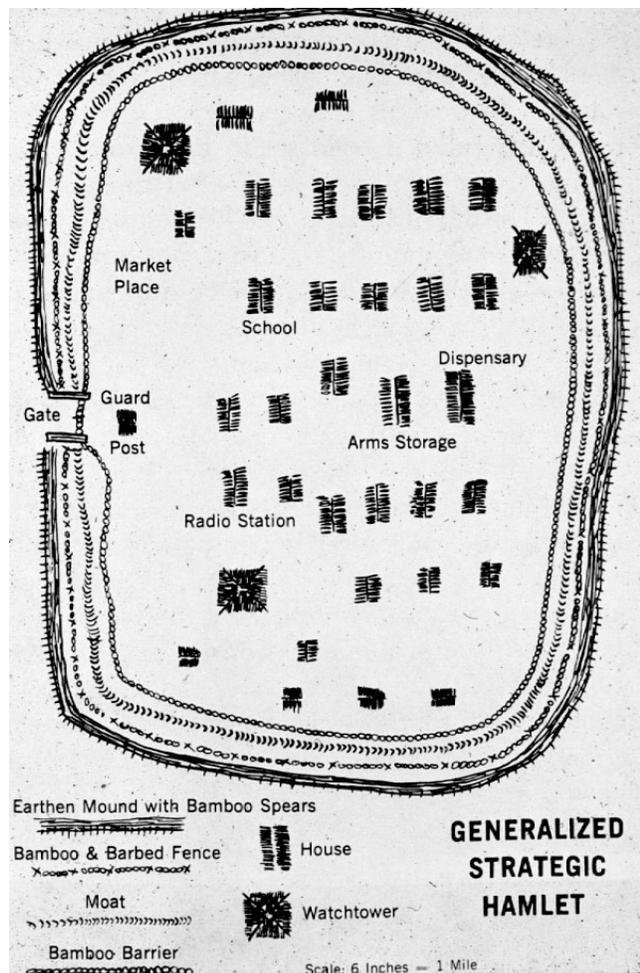
## The Strategic Hamlet Program

President Ngo Dinh Diem realized that he was losing South Vietnam to the Vietcong village by village. He therefore decided to start the 'strategic hamlet program' which, with U.S. aid, became the main way to prevent the spread of communism in South Vietnam.

Strategic hamlets were special villages built for loyal South Vietnamese. To encourage the South Vietnamese to move into these hamlets, there would be a school, a hospital, electricity and some modern conveniences. A barbed wire or a bamboo fence to keep the VC out would surround the hamlet. The men in the hamlets would be provided with weapons and military training to enable them to defend themselves and their families from the VC. South Vietnamese Army defense forces would be stationed in the region to come to the aid of hamlets if necessary.

The main purpose of the strategic hamlet program was to separate the loyal South Vietnamese from the Vietcong. All the people in the hamlets were considered <sup>2</sup> friendly. Those living outside of the hamlets could be thought of as the enemy. To use the analogy of the guerrilla and the people – the hamlets were a way to dry up the ocean that gives life to the fish (guerrillas).

The Strategic Hamlet Program gained the support of U.S. military planners and was advocated by President Eisenhower as well as his successor, John F. Kennedy. By September 1962, over one-third of the population of South Vietnam, an estimated 4,300,000 South Vietnamese, were living in strategic hamlets.



<sup>2</sup> <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/USPics2>

## Problems with the Strategic Hamlet Program

The Hamlet Program was not without its faults. The following is a partial list:

- Many peasants did not want to leave their own villages where their families had lived for hundreds of years to go to these strategic hamlets.
- Sometimes, the hamlets were too far away from the fields in which the peasants worked.
- Often the promised military, medical, and agricultural supplies, never got to the hamlets. The supplies often disappeared somewhere on the road from Saigon. and they often re-appear for sale in market places in towns and cities.
- The village chiefs, appointed by Diem, were often unpopular. Many stole and cheated the people in the hamlets.

## What happened at An loc

There was no moon that night. Even alert guards might have had difficulty seeing the 50 men who suddenly emerged from the jungle and ran toward the gate. They were wearing the plain peasant clothing known to Americans as black pajamas. Each member of the village defense force was struck and knocked down from behind with a single blow. Their throats were cut and they were left to die. The guerillas captured the village chief, brought him in plain view for all in the hamlet to see. They killed the chief and his family, while denouncing Diem and the South Vietnamese government. They blamed Diem and his American advisors for forcing them into An loc in the first place. Then they dared the South Vietnamese Army to come to the aid of the village.



**US evacuating wounded. Convoy had been ambushed on way to support an advanced camp.**

Ten miles away, Captain Carnham's field telephone rang — it was Captain Cam of the South Vietnamese army. He had just been told that the Vietcong had captured An loc. His soldiers were 10 miles away. It would be too difficult for his men to drive the Vietcong out. There were too many places on the road for the enemy to hide and ambush his men. Cam decided to ask Captain Carnham to bomb the village and kill the invaders.

Carnham thought long and hard about this request, before answering.

## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Comment on the rationale behind the strategic hamlet program and its and the strengths and weaknesses of
2. Do you think that Captain Carnham should order an air strike of An loc as requested by his South Vietnamese counterpart, Captain Cam? Consider, strength of the program, domino theory, and character of Diem regime.

## Epilogue

The story of An loc is based on an incident depicted in Robin Moore's book, *The Green Berets*, an account of the elite US forces serving in Vietnam as counter-insurgency duty. In the real life story, the U.S. ordered an attack on the hamlet by American air planes. Here is part of Robin Moore's description of the results:

*Badly wounded and burned children were dying everywhere. Men, women, and cows lay dead, and smelled to high heaven. The South Vietnamese Army had come into the village after American bombing and artillery had driven out the enemy. The [South Vietnamese] did not even have a man wounded. The South Vietnamese had refused to fight the V.C. in armed combat.*

Despite the good intentions of the United States its policies in Vietnam often paralleled the tragic results dramatized in this chapter. The U.S. underwrote programs like the Strategic Hamlet plan to make it easier to win the war. But the people who were supposed to be helped frequently were not consulted, often did not cooperate, occasionally were corrupt, and seldom wanted to fight. As a result, the U.S. on many occasions was called in to use its superior firepower that killed the very civilians they had come to Vietnam to protect.

## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. What is the moral of this story?