

REFLECTIONS ON SERVICE IN CORDS IN THE MEKONG DELTA: 1968-74

BY

AMBASSADOR KENNETH M. QUINN

INTRODUCTION AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND

From 1968 to 1970, as a member of Advisory Team 65, I served as District Senior Advisor, first in Duc Thanh District, and subsequently in Duc Ton District of Sa Dec Province. From 1970 to 1971 I was assigned as a member of the MACV/CORDS staff in Saigon. From 1972 to 1974, I was a member of the provincial staff of ADV. Team 64 in Chau Doc Province. [From June 1973 to May 1974, CORDS no longer existed and I was technically assigned to the US Consulate General in Can Tho, although I resided and worked in Chau Doc covering the Cambodian border].

My service in MACV/CORDS between 1968 and 1973 provided me with experiences and lessons learned which have great potential relevance for three issues now facing America, including:

- 1] Providing an insight into a "weapon" to use to undermine, weaken and destroy terrorist organizations;
- 2] A bureaucratic structure which could effectively organize the US government's effort to provide Homeland Security; and
- 3] A model for a way to increase the sharing of intelligence within the USG;

ROADS AND RICE: AN IMPROBABLE BUT AMAZINGLY EFFECTIVE ASSET IN COMBATTING TERRORISM

----By far, the most significant experience I took away from CORDS was the power of roads [particularly rural roads] combined with modern agricultural technology in weakening and destroying indigenous guerilla [i.e. terrorist] forces.

----I first observed this phenomenon in late 1968 in SaDec Province, which contained a series of inter-locking Viet Cong base areas. These remote heavily fortified areas were largely inaccessible to friendly forces. A coordinated main force US/ARVN operation sought to expand GVN control in these base areas, and thus MR 4 opened a campaign with B-52 strikes and for a limited period, providing sweep operations by the US 9th and the ARVN 9th Divisions .

----The Viet Cong were weakened by these coordinated strikes which provided an entry way for the less aggressive GVN provincial units to try to consolidate these gains and expand them. Villages previously under firm Viet Cong control could now be visited during the day, but "the night still belonged to Charlie" as the saying used to go. To pacify the district, the government and CORDS implemented a series of New Life Development activities intended to win support for the government.

---- Enormous amounts of time and effort were spent trying to get villagers to form village development committees, join the Peoples Self Defense Force, provide information on the Viet Cong infrastructure to the Phung Hoang program, and similar programs. Popular MedCAP operations brought US doctors and dentists into villages to offer free health care. But, while all of these endeavors were somewhat helpful, they could not fully counter nor eliminate the Viet Cong units and personnel who remained in the area and operated with a great deal of freedom at night, recruiting young men to join their forces and collecting taxes.

----And then in early 1969, two things happened, quite by coincidence, which had a dramatic impact on the security situation and which provided me the most lasting impression about the power of these two quintessentially American innovations. First, the US began rehabilitating a gravel road which ran through the district. At the same time, the US introduced new "miracle rice", the name given to the new strain of high yielding, quick growing IR-8 rice that had been developed at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines as part of the "Green Revolution."

---- While it was totally serendipity that these two endeavors occurred at the same time, the impact of these two developments occurring simultaneously became apparent to me when the road was about half finished.

--There were 8 villages in Duc Thanh District. By late 1969, the road and the bridges built to span the numerous canals that criss-crossed the district, were completed through four of the villages.

----During that same period, the provincial agriculture advisor worked with his counterparts to conduct demonstration plots of the new rice, which required significant irrigation and pesticides. Since using the new rice seed cut the growing season in half, farmers suddenly could produce two crops a year, each with higher yields than their previous traditional seeds. They also could grow a third crop of vegetables.

---- Incomes increased, as did the quality of life for all using this new approach to agriculture. With the new road, trucks came from Saigon to buy up the surplus crops. Freed from subsistence agriculture, farmers suddenly could afford new roofing for their homes, better clothing for their families and even a radio or, in a few cases, a TV.

-- In addition, the new road permitted children to get back and forth to schools in nearby villages, so that students now stayed in class longer [especially girls]. There was also an impact on child nutrition and mortality, as people could get out to hospitals and health care much more quickly, and health workers could visit remote hamlets. Information flowed into these hamlets bringing ideas associated with political moderation, respect for human rights and a positive image of the central government.

----But the most noticeable change was in the greater sense of security that developed in those villages along the road. While it had been considered prohibitively dangerous to travel to those four villages at night, now it seemed that the Viet Cong simply evaporated. Recruiting and tax collecting decreased and then disappeared. GVN officials and US advisors moved about day and night without fear.

----However, where the road stopped, so did the changes. While there was nothing to stop any farmer in those other four villages without a road from using the miracle rice, none did. When one crossed the canal by sampan or bamboo bridge, and walked through those villages, there was a palpable sense of a reduction in security. Armed escorts were required by day, and you just didn't go at night.

----Moreover, the quality of life in those four villages was largely unchanged from that of 100 years ago. Adults and children were poorly clothed, and thin, reflecting mal-nourishment. Houses were all made of thatch and had no new tin roofs as was the case in the villages with the road. Child mortality rates remained high and school attendance low. Government employees were reluctant to travel there to provide services. The ongoing Viet Cong presence could be readily felt by the distance villagers kept from outside visitors.

----But as we pressed ahead, extending the road into the previous "V" hamlets [denoting Viet Cong control], the miracle rice inexorably followed. And the miracle of the change in the political atmosphere came too. What the B-52's and main force US/ARVN units could not achieve, the new roads and rice did: They rooted out and eradicated the Viet Cong infrastructure.

---- This progress in the quality of life countered the efforts of the Viet Cong political leaders in a way that no Phung Hoang targeting could. It destroyed the reason for young men to join the terrorists and for families to willingly support them. Eventually, the same two innovations that transformed America in the 19th century, served to bring change to the Mekong Delta, eliminating the Viet Cong terrorist organization.

----When I left Duc Thanh in mid 1970, the district was virtually full pacified. There were many reasons for this success, but it was clear to me that without the road and rice being introduced together [remember this happened by accident], the results would not have been the same.

SIMILAR RESULTS IN DUC TON DISTRICT

----This necessity for simultaneous implementation was confirmed during my next assignment.

----In June 1970, I asked DepCORDS MR 4, John Paul Vann, to assign me to Duc Ton District as District Senior Advisor. The Viet Cong infrastructure there remained firmly ensconced. As a result, heavy involvement in helicopter operations was required to try to soften the adversary.

----We again began to apply the lessons of roads and rice to the abandoned villages there but encountered stiff Viet Cong resistance. This continued danger kept US and GVN agricultural staff from working in the area, thus slowing the introduction of miracle rice, and the building of the needed irrigation systems.

---- By the end of 1970, the road we were building into the "Y" base area was complete and villagers were beginning to move back and begin planting. But pacification was slowed by the lack of assistance in introducing miracle rice.

APPLYING THE LESSONS OF DUC THANH AGAINST THE GENOCIDAL KHMER ROUGE TWENTY YEARS LATER

----In 1990, when I became Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, I had the opportunity to once again apply this theory to Cambodia, when the UN Peace Agreement we negotiated opened the country to US assistance.

----The Khmer Rouge had killed approximately two million of the seven million Cambodians during their four year reign of terror beginning in 1975. In 1979, 200,000 North Vietnamese troops swept into Cambodia and within a week had captured Phnom Penh routing the fanatical Khmer Rouge and sending them fleeing into the countryside.

---- But then for the next decade, what some had called the "the finest jungle fighting army in the world," took heavy casualties as it tried unsuccessfully to eliminate the remnants of the Khmer Rouge.

----In 1990, with 25,000 Khmer Rouge fighters still active and controlling much of the countryside, the Vietnamese withdrew as part of the Paris Agreement to provide a UN transitional administration and hold free elections. The Secretary of State determined that the top US goal in Cambodia was to ensure the KR never came back to power. My task was destroying the KR.

----At the conference on rehabilitating Cambodia in Tokyo in 1991, I devised the plan to commit all of our initial, high impact AID funds --\$11 million--to improving rural roads. Subsequently, in 1992 we identified funds to completely re-do the major national highway linking Phnom Penh with its main seaport. Where ever we operated, the Khmer Rouge resisted but soon had to give up trying to stop the road. Security began improving as enemy initiated incidents declined.

---- Then when I went to Cambodia as ambassador in 1996, with great difficulty, we convinced USAID Washington to fund further rural roads into major KR base areas. And in partnership with the central government, we emphasized de-mining as the first step to opening roads and penetrating KR strongholds.

----Once again, the results were dramatic. With appropriate intelligence support and generous government programs for those who gave up, wherever we built a road, the Khmer Rouge began to crumble. Soon the Duc Thanh experience began to be replicated across Cambodia.

----In 1999, a few months before I left post, the last Khmer Rouge general surrendered. In less than 10 years, the 25,000 Khmer Rouge had been reduced to zero, marking the first and perhaps only time the US government had succeeded in completely eradicating a terrorist organization. Construction of rural roads was at the heart of this achievement.

COORDINATING USG ACTIVITIES AND INTELLIGENCE SHARING

----CORDS also provides an exceptional model for organizing the US government within our national effort to counter terrorist threats to our homeland. In Vietnam, CORDS reduced normal inter-agency rivalries, allowing both civilian and military officers to work together as part of the same team. Beyond that, by being part of the same institution, the reticence to share intelligence information was significantly reduced, and nearly eliminated.

----The key to having this highly effective cooperation, was the process by which work evaluation reports [so crucial for promotions] were prepared by one's immediate superior, even though he was almost invariably from another agency. Moreover, this bureaucratic structure allowed for the immediate removal of an individual seen to not be performing at an acceptable level.

---- To understand the effectiveness of this approach, one needs to know the details of how CORDS was organized and from whence it got its employees.

----MACV/CORDS was an integrated civilian/military organization under the command of COMUS/MACV. CORDS was created to be the action element to assist the Government of Vietnam in attacking, countering and defeating the Viet Cong, the indigenous communist force located throughout South Viet Nam.

----A separate element of MACV directed the US units and the advisory teams that assisted the ARVN divisions that targeted North Vietnamese main force units.

----Within each province there was a US advisory team that advised and assisted the Vietnamese army officer who served as province chief, as well as the Vietnamese officers who headed the subordinate commands known as district

----MACV/CORDS was under the command of COMUS/MACV. During my years of assignment, this position was filled by General Creighton Abrams, and then by General Fred Weyand. COMUS/MACV was headquartered at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. He had two deputies: One was a general officer who directed the US advisory effort through the AFRVN command and general staff to the ARVN main force units [Army Divisions, the VN Air Force and the VN Navy].

----The second deputy was a civilian, known as the Deputy for CORDS or, as everyone called him, DepCORDS. First Ambassador William Colby and subsequently George Jacobsen held this position. They had 3-star equivalent rank and directed [through the MACV military Chief of Staff] those elements of the MACV staff which supported the US advisory effort at the provincial, district and village level. The DepCORDS had a one star deputy chief of staff.

----These MACV/CORDS staff elements at the Saigon level were known as Directorates. Half were headed by civilian employees, and the other by military officers at the O-6 level. Directorates

had staff responsibility for: Territorial Forces; Reports and Analysis; Pacification Studies [Hamlet Evaluation System]; Phung Hoang [Phoenix]; New Life Development; National Police;

----In every instance within this integrated chain of command, officer evaluation reports were prepared by military officers on civilians, and vice versa.

----This command structure was replicated at the four Corps or Military Region [MR] headquarters located at: Da Nang [MR One]; Nha Trang [MR Two]; Bien Hoa [MR Three]; and Can Tho [MR Four]. The US 2 star commanding general in each MR had: a US military deputy who directed the operations of all regular US military units and the US advisory effort to AFRVN mainforce units; and a civilian deputy who directed all provincial advisory teams. This civilian deputy was also known as DepCords, but with the military region added at the end, [e.g. DepCORDS MR 4] to prevent confusion with THE DepCORDS in Saigon].

----There were 44 provinces in the Republic of Vietnam. Provinces were subdivided into districts, villages and hamlets. Each province was headed by a Vietnamese military officer with the rank of colonel. He commanded all local forces in the province known as Provincial Forces [PF] and Regional Forces [RF]. RF were better trained and equipped and were available for assignment throughout the province. PF units generally stayed in the district in which they were recruited and manned the ubiquitous mud forts [known as outposts] found in most villages and populated areas. A lightly armed civilian home guard organization known as the People's Self Defense Force [PSDF] was formed in many villages.

----In each province there was a civilian/military integrated advisory team. In about half, the teams were headed by a civilian with a military deputy. In the other half, the command roles were reversed. The Provincial Senior Advisor [known to all as the PSA] and the Deputy Provincial Senior Advisor [DPSA] supervised the provincial staff, which was divided into a civilian development section headed by the civilian NLD Chief, and a military staff known as the sector advisory team.

----At the district level, there were 8 to 10 man US sub-sector advisory teams. Most were headed by a US Army major or captain, who was known as the District Senior Advisor or DSA. In some instances, a language-trained civilian was assigned to the team. In a few districts, the civilian officer was made the DSA, with a military deputy. Again, officer evaluation reports were routinely prepared and signed by military officers for civilian personnel and vice versa.

----CORDS personnel came from a wide variety of agencies and organizations. In the first province to which I was assigned [SaDec Province in MR 4], the PSA was from the US Information Agency. The DPSA was an Army 0-6. The NLD chief was a permanent hire USAID employee [with Peace Corps background]. The Public Affairs/Psypops advisor was a Coast Guard 0-5. The provincial medical team was made up of Air Force docs and medics. Two direct hire USAID public safety officers [former US police officers] advised the national police; A USDA permanent employee was the provincial Agriculture advisor. A DOD civilian employee was the provincial engineering advisor. A State Department FSO was the deputy NLD advisor; and three State officers [including myself] served on district teams.

----Military personnel performed many civilian advisory functions and in some situations civilians carried out military functions. As District Senior Advisor, I directed numerous helicopter operations inserting troops and searching for Viet Cong.

---- In one of the most unusual events in US military history, John Paul Vann, a retired US Army officer and USAID contract employee, was appointed as Senior Advisor of MR 2. He was in effect the commanding general as he replaced a US Army 2 star general. This put him in command and control of all US main force units in that region, probably the only time a civilian commanded US regular units in combat.

----In CORDS at both the provincial level and when I served on the MACV staff in Saigon, the sense that we faced danger together, had a shared mission and that we were part of a unified team removed many of the impediments to sharing intelligence and other crucial information. It also provided a clarity of command so important in crisis situations.

----As such, the CORDS structure would seem an exceptional model to be adopted by the new Homeland Security Department to coordinate the US response to a terrorist attack nation wide. Where it is crucial to now achieve complete coordination within all elements of the Homeland Security apparatus, the CORDS model could be the best means to achieve what has been such an elusive goal.

----It would also seem a valuable model for the intelligence community to emulate in Washington, to reduce the friction and hesitation in sharing information and analysis.