

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

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Modern Wars:

Ia Drang

DATE:

Nov. 14–18, 1965

LOCATION:

Central Highlands, Vietnam

OPPOSING FORCES

North Vietnamese: Three regiments of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, or NVA) took part in the campaign: the 32nd, 33rd, and 66th. They were organized in the B3 Central Highlands Front, a division-like structure commanded by Brig. Gen. Chu Huy Mân. The 66th Regiment did most of the fighting during the battle.

Americans: The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment (1/7 Cav), commanded by Lt. Col. Harold "Hal" Moore, and the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment (2/7 Cav), commanded by Lt. Col. Robert McDade, were the primary units of the battle. Both were part of the 3rd Brigade (3rd BDE) of the newly created 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) commanded by Maj. Gen. Harry Kinnard. Kinnard reported to Maj. Gen. Stanley Larsen, the commander of 1 Field Force (the US component of II Corps Tactical Zone). Larsen, in turn, reported to Gen. William Westmoreland, the commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

South Vietnamese units, known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), were assigned to the ARVN II Corps, commanded by Maj. Gen. Nguyễn Phúc Vĩnh Lộc.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

During October 1965, the North Vietnam Army (NVA) launched a campaign to destroy South Vietnam's strategic reserve and control the Central Highlands. In response, Gen. William Westmoreland committed an entire US division in what would be the first large-scale US combat action of the war. After the NVA attack was defeated, the 1st Cavalry Division (1st Cav) began a weeks-long pursuit, culminating in the costly Battle of Ia Drang. Although the Americans held on to win the battle, ominous signs indicated that the war had shifted from "advise and assist" to direct US combat. Even worse, Ia Drang moved the war into a contest of attrition, where "body counts" and "search and destroy" missions would lead the US and South Vietnam down the path to failure.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the North Vietnamese – Vietnam had been under French occupation dating back to the late 19th century. This

through organized resistance to the Japanese. After the war, when the Allies tried to restore French sovereignty, the communist Ho Chi Minh not only resisted but was also intent on unifying Vietnam under communist rule. "If we have to fight," he said in 1945, "you will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours, and in the end, it will be you who tire of it."¹ Prescient words indeed. By 1946, the relationship between France and the Viet Minh collapsed, marking the start of the First Indochina War (1946–1954). While France, with help from the US, tried to defeat the insurgency, the 1954 French defeat at Dien Bien Phu changed everything. Soon, what was meant to be a temporary partition along the 17th parallel became another Cold War line, with the Soviets and Chinese supporting the North and the US supporting the South.

But unlike Kim Il-Sung's conventional war in Korea, Ho Chi Minh waged a "people's war." Between 1955 and 1958, he built an insurgency of 10,000 hardcore communists (Viet Cong) operating in the south.² By early 1960, they were even capable of battalion-sized attacks. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh and his top general, Võ Nguyên Giáp, also built a conventional force and moved men and supplies south through Laos and Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In 1963, the South Korean president, Ngo Dinh Diem, was killed in a military coup. Shortly after, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. These events accelerated Ho Chi Minh's plans. Sensing an opportunity, Giáp developed a campaign for the regular army (NVA) to increase the pressure.



North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp



Giáp would deploy a division, the B3 Front (commanded by Brig. Gen. Chu Huy Mân), from the sanctuary of Cambodia into the western Central Highlands. There, they would lure ARVN forces into an ambush using Mân's 33rd Regt to attack the ARVN Special Forces outpost at Plei Me, while the 32nd Regt lay in wait for the ARVN relief column coming from Pleiku. (Map 1) Using the cover of the jungle and the lack of good roads to his advantage, he