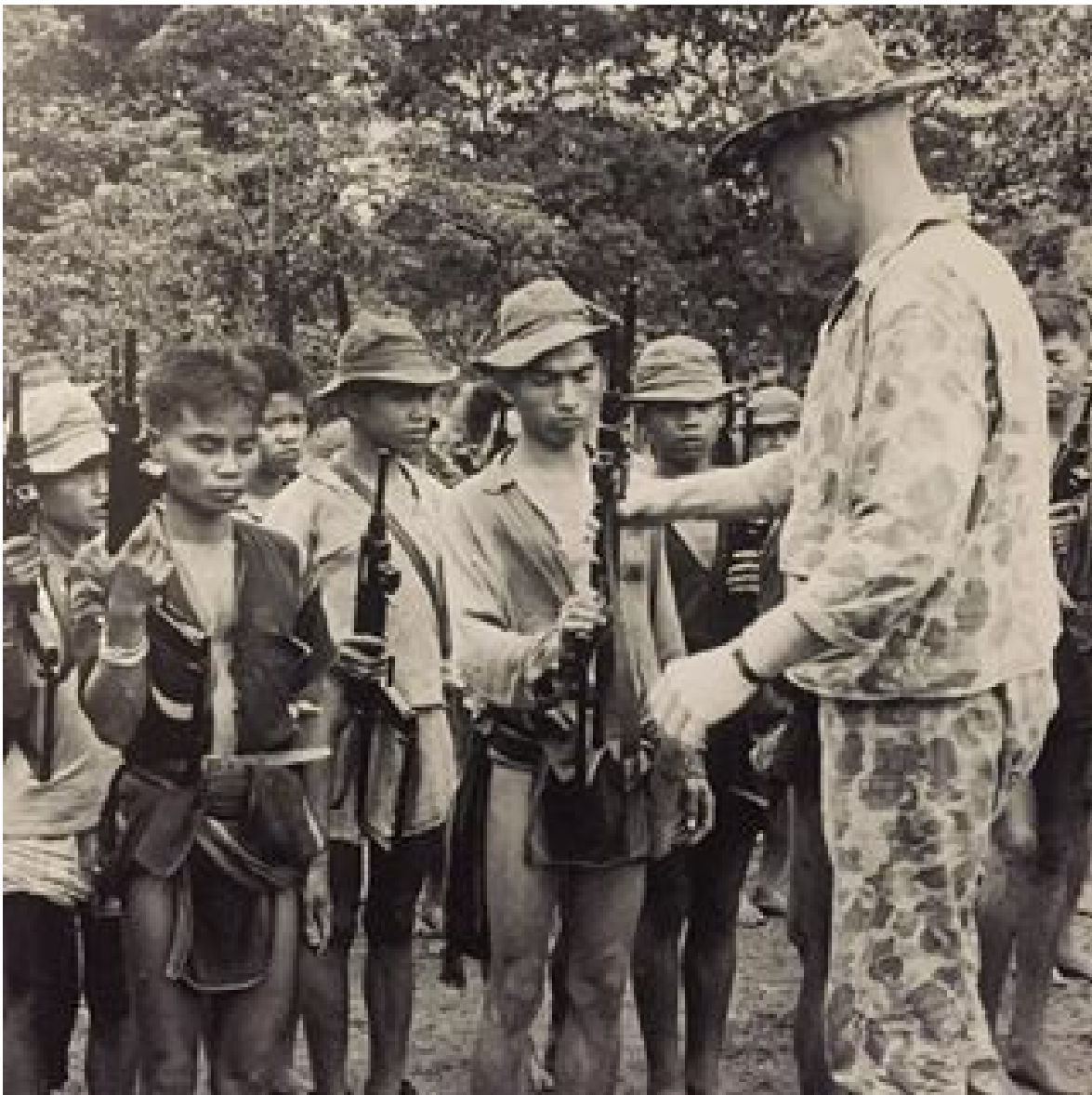


# THE MONTAGNARD EXPERIMENT

## Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Efforts in the Central Highlands

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Montagnard fighters are instructed by U.S. Special Forces soldier

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## Introduction

The United States have been involved in Vietnam since the end of World War II. After the Japanese had been defeated in 1945, the U.S. government was instrumental in helping France regain control over its former colony.

After Dien Bien Phu, the battle that ended French involvement in Indochina in 1954, the Americans helped set up the South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem and gave it substantial aid in the form of military aid and advisors. As part of this commitment, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was running counterinsurgency programs that included the indigenous Montagnards in the Central Highlands.

The first section will explain the history of irregular warfare in the U.S. Military. This is followed by a short history of Vietnam under President Diem and of the Montagnards.

The second section will deal with the U.S. counterinsurgency program in the Central Highlands, from its start in 1961 in Buon Enao to the expansion of CIDG in 1962 and 1963. Operation Switchback will be analyzed in detail, trying to understand why the successful program that stabilized Darlac province in a little more than a year, would deteriorate within two more years to the point that the Montagnards rebelled in a number of CIDG camps, held U.S. Special Forces captive and killed more than 30 South Vietnamese soldiers.

The third section, (Aftermath), will outline how the counterinsurgency program developed after 1965 and attempt a summary of the lessons learned.

## Leadup

### Irregular Warfare and the U.S. Armed Forces

The roots of U.S. Army Special Forces can be found in World War II. In early 1942, the British Chief of Combined Operations, Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, introduced to the U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall a project [...] for the development of special equipment to be used in snow-covered mountain terrain. General Marshall concluded that an elite force recruited in Canada and the United States would be the best

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military organization for conducting these raids and strikes. The resulting organization, the 1st Special Service Force was the first Special Forces group in the U.S. Armed Forces. (Kelly 1973 p,3)

In 1952, the 10th Special Forces Group was activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It became the nucleus of the Special Warfare Center, known today as the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance. (Kelly 1973 p.4) These were the units mostly active in the late 1950s to train and support the Vietnamese.

In the early 1960s, the Special Forces program would receive a significant boost by the new President. John F. Kennedy was unhappy with the U.S. Army's irregular warfare capabilities. During the Eisenhower years, the Armed Forces had concentrated on a strategy of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Kennedy observed that future Cold War conflict was most likely to take the form of proxy wars in far away places where the MAD strategy was impracticable. He therefore advocated a new strategy of flexible response. One of the main pillars of this strategy was the buildup of Special Forces capabilities, specifically trained and equipped for irregular warfare. Beginning in the fall of 1961, he became a powerful advocate for the development of the Special Forces Program within the Army. He visited the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg and it was by his authorization that the Special Forces troops were allowed to wear their distinctive headgear, the green beret. (Kelly 1973 p.5)

## **Vietnam after Dien Bien Phu**

After the battle of Dien Bien Phu had concluded in early May 1954, nine national delegations assembled in the old League of Nations building in Geneva to open discussions on how to end the Indochina War. (Addington 2000 p.43) The main driver of the compromise that was finally reached was the Chinese delegation leader, Chou En-lai. He proposed to split the country at the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the State of Vietnam (SOV) in the south. This split was to be temporary though and there were national elections planned for 1956, when the country could be reunited under one government. Ho Chi Minh did not agree with the solution, but he could hardly go against his Chinese and Soviet backers who supported the plan. The American delegation was instructed by the Eisenhower administration merely to

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observe and not to participate in the negotiation. The final agreements were signed in July of 1954. (Addington 2000 p.44)

Under pressure from the American government, Bao Dai, the Vietnamese monarch, selected Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister in 1954. This made Diem the head of government of the SOV, but his power and control at the time was very limited. The reasons for this lay in the way the French had governed their colony. Using divide and conquer tactics and eliminating local elites, the governing infrastructure of the SOV was all but nonexistent. Diem therefore immediately set out to consolidate his power by winning over the army, the bureaucratic apparatus and the country as a whole.

His methods were repressive and effective. With significant material help from the U.S. government he bought the loyalty of some of the factions while attacking others. He showed a lot of skill in political maneuvering and was able to strengthen his rule and stabilize the country. The Americans were duly impressed and called these developments the 'Diem Miracle'.<sup>1</sup>

By 1955, Diem, who had never supported the Geneva Accords, called for an election to select between him and Bao Dai to become Vietnam's next president. The results were predictable and Diem won the contest with 98.3% of the vote. (Hickey 1982 p.5) After the election, he proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam (ROV).

To further consolidate his power, Diem instituted a policy of assimilation. This policy was designed to surmount the challenge of the many-faceted ethnic, cultural and religious setup of Vietnam. He attempted to assimilate the different minorities into the Vietnamese cultural sphere. In the Central Highlands, he also launched the Land Development Program, in which thousands of coastal Vietnamese were sent to live in what had previously been tribal areas. Some of the names of the villages and cities were changed from their traditional to Vietnamese names. (Hickey 1982 p.45)

This policy of assimilation did not work, not in the Highlands, not with the minorities in the coastal regions. If anything, it made matters worse. It created tremendous minority

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<sup>1</sup> Booklet, U. S. Information Service - South Vietnam: The Formative Years, (ca. 1964), Folder 01, Box 01, Milton Adams Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0040101004>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

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resentment<sup>2</sup> and fertile ground for the communist to recruit followers in the rural areas of the country.

## **The Montagnards**

Like so many countries in Southeast Asia, the nation-state of Vietnam is a composite. The origins of the country are in the fertile Red River delta in the north of the country. Since the first Hung dynasty, founded in 2879 B.C, the history of Vietnam was one of southward expansion. (Cima 1989 p.3) The coastal areas are inhabited by Vietnamese of Chinese descent, but the ethnical setup of the country is far more diverse. The Central Highlands, the mountainous area in the Annamite Chain north of Saigon and leading up to the 17th parallel, is inhabited by indigenous tribes.

Montagnards is a term that was applied by the French to the 35-40 tribes (e.g. Rhade, Jarai, Bahnar, Koho and Mnong) inhabiting the Central Highlands of Vietnam. They are mainly of Malayo-Polynesian, Tai, and Austroasiatic extraction. Ethnically different from the Vietnamese of the coastal regions, they have been at odds with them for centuries. Due to their fighting qualities and the strategic importance of their homeland<sup>3</sup>, the French had tried to recruit them to fight the Viet-Minh during the 1940s and 50s.

The Montagnards mostly wanted to live by themselves and be left alone. Their relationship with the Vietnamese was fraught. The Vietnamese called them 'moy', which means savage, and tried to keep them under control. The geographical position of their homeland made them very important in the fight against northern infiltration though. The Central Highlands are the main gateway for anybody who wants to invade the south of the country from the north. This is the main reason why the CIA continued what the French had started and enlisted the Montagnards to fight the Viet Cong. They might not fight to defend the government in Saigon, but the American very quickly understood that the Montagnards were very willing to fight for their own defense and to gain back the limited autonomy they had enjoyed under French rule.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Michael Benge, 31 January 2002, Michael Benge Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from: <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

<sup>3</sup> Howard Sochurek. (1968). Vietnam's Montagnards. National Geographics. (Issue April 1968). p.487

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This however brought to light an inconsistency in American foreign policy that dated back to World War I and President Wilson's 14 Points. In it, the U.S. government had introduced self-determination as part of its war aims. As a result, the U.S. government generally supported the quest of minorities for self-determination and autonomy. On the other hand, the struggle against International communism became increasingly important in geopolitical calculations, and the U.S. government often was reduced to support colonial control or at least what they considered stable local governments friendly to U.S. interests. Any promises the Americans made to the Montagnards would at some point become contested by the government in Saigon, who did not want to grant autonomy to the Montagnards.

## **Counterinsurgency in the Central Highlands**

### **The Buon Eno Project**

The origins of America's counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam can be traced to a 23 year-old Kansan, David A. Nuttle, who travelled through the Central Highlands for the International Voluntary Service (IVS), a non-governmental organization supporting agricultural projects in South Vietnam. Nuttle was invited in early 1961 to appear in front of the Country Team at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. The Country Team was working for CIA Station Chief William Colby on finding alternatives how the American could fight the Viet Cong infiltration.

Nuttle had built many relationships with the Rhadé, the main tribe in Darlac Province. He had even written a study of the different ethnicities in the Central Highlands and he felt it would be possible to enlist the Montagnards against Communist infiltration. They would not fight for the South Vietnamese, but they did mind North Vietnamese infiltration of their homeland just as much as they did South Vietnamese oppression. If the Montagnards could be persuaded to fight for the security of their own villages, they could probably be enlisted. William Colby liked the idea, but knew that the main problem would be to get the approval from the South Vietnamese government. Diem did not want to arm what he regarded as savages. Colby, after several months of persuasion, was able, mainly with the help of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's brother, to win over Diem. (Harris 2013 p.13)

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The project started with a pilot. Stringent conditions had to be met, among them the fact that village elders would be personally responsible not to allow any Viet Cong activities in the village. They also had to build a defensive perimeter around the village and advertise the fact that they were part of the American program. If these conditions were met, they would receive medical care, training in modern agricultural techniques, empowerment of village leaders to become more self sufficient, arms and training to defend themselves. (Piasecki 2009 p.2)

Responsibility for the execution of the project was given to David Nuttle, who in the meantime had become a CIA Case Officer. With the help of an interpreter and a Special Forces medic, he started to tour the Central Highland looking for a suitable village. He settled on Buon Enao, a small village just a couple of miles from Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac province. Nuttle would meet and discuss politics with the village elders, while the medic treated villagers. It took several weeks to persuade them. The leaders of the Rhadé village were understandably concerned that the Americans were just trying to manipulate them for their own ends, just like the French and South Vietnamese had done. In the end, they agreed.

That was the start of the U.S. counterinsurgency program in Vietnam's Central Highlands. The project proved to be very successful and it started expanding almost as soon as it had begun. Buon Enao became a base for training further villagers that joined the program.

Within just a couple of months, in April of 1962, an additional 39 villages had joined the program. By October 1962, what had started in Buon Enao had grown to include 200 villages, protecting about 60,000 people in 200 villages with a force of 10,600 Village Defenders and 1,500 Strike Force personnel. (Harris 2013 p.25)

The Buon Enao program was considered a resounding success. Village defenders [...] accepted the training and weapons enthusiastically and became strongly motivated to oppose the Viet Cong, against whom they fought well. Largely because of the presence of these forces, the South Vietnamese government toward the end of 1962 declared Darlac Province secure. (Hickey 2002 p.101)

## **The Civilian Irregular Defense Group**



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When the the Buon Enao project started to grow, it was renamed CIDG. (Kelly 1973 p.32) The training and arming of the Montagnards was expanded. Of course, these were not the only counterinsurgency programs going on at the time. There was the Strategic Hamlet Program that had been started by the Diem administration with American support almost concurrently with Buon Enao in early 1962. It was based on the Rural Community Development Program that had been started by the Government of Vietnam (GVN) in the late 1950s. The basic idea was to build fortified hamlets where the population could be defended and isolated from communist infiltration.

CIDG's strategy was also defensive in nature. But instead of uprooting entire villages and robbing families of their homeland, culture and ways of sustenance, CIDG gave them the means to defend themselves, to fortify their own villages.

Another thing that set CIDG apart though was that it was entirely run by the CIA. (Ahern 2009 p.42) Strategic Hamlet was mainly run by the GVN, more precisely by Ngo Dinh Nhu's Security Services. Nhu, President Diem's brother, was despised by the population for running the security apparatus of GVN. This led to a lot of resentment by the people it was supposed to protect. (Osborn 1965 p.25)

The CIA worked with people outside the Agency for the project in Buon Enao. There was a Special Forces A-Team that had been deployed Darlac Province in February 1962. (Hickey 2002 p.84) There were also some Vietnamese Special Forces involved in the project, but they were mostly of Rhadé descent themselves so as not to aggravate the Montagnards. The CIA controlled the operational, financial and political aspects of the program in all its essentials. They decided who would take part in the program, who would be armed and how. There was virtually no involvement of GVN.

They also controlled the strategy of the counterinsurgency. Based on the experiences at Buon Enao, the CIA decided on a defensive strategy for the program. The Montagnards would remain in their villages, not be transferred to a 'safe' hamlet, they would stay with their families and the help they were receiving (e.g. medical and agricultural help, education) was conditioned only on the fact that they would keep Viet Cong infiltration out and their villages secure, something that was in their interest as well. The program worked because its strategy was aligned with the interests of the people it was supposed to protect.

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## Operation Switchback

After the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, President Kennedy decided to fundamentally change the way the United States engaged in covert warfare. He signed National Security Action Memo 55, in which he ordered the military to take over all current and future paramilitary activities of the CIA.<sup>4</sup> This had a huge effect on the CIDG program in South Vietnam.

As a result of a meeting between Desmond FitzGerald (CIA) and Paul Nitze (Dept. of Defense) in May 1962, Operation Switchback started in July 1962. It was agreed that responsibility for all CIDG assets would be turned over to MACV, the highest military authority in Vietnam. Also, all operations were to be coordinated with the Vietnamese Special Forces, under the command of Gen. Le Quang Tung. (Hickey 2002 p.101)

In Vietnam this decision was not well received. The CIA felt, correctly as later developments were to show, that the handover to MACV and the involvement of the Vietnamese Special Forces were going to distort the program's mission. But there were major misgivings in the Armed Forces as well. General Harkins, whose MACV had been entrusted with the running of CIDG, was a known opponent of military participation in counterinsurgency operations. He felt the military's organization and size did not lend itself to these types of operations. (Ahern 2009 p.91)

Unfortunately, they were all to be proven right. CIDG, which had been called an unqualified success in securing Darlac Province even by GVN as late as October 1962, was to lose its effectiveness through 1963. In 1964 and 1965, the Montagnards staged a series of rebellions in which they held U.S. Special Forces soldiers captive and killed some 30 SVA soldiers. There were also a number of demonstrations in Ban Me Thuot, Darlac Province's capital. There are several reasons for these developments which will be analyzed in detail here.

## Change of Strategy

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<sup>4</sup> National Security Action Memorandum Number 55: Relations of Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations, June 28, 1961, The Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. Available from: (<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/sjtthyMxu06GMct7OymAvw.aspx>) [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

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The Buon Enao project had been first and foremost a defensive program. The Montagnards were securing their own villages against communist infiltration. It was what military theorists call a 'population-centric counterinsurgency'.

Traditional U.S. Army doctrine favored a more enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency, where troops go on the offensive and search for the enemy. (Carr 2012 p.11) This doctrine was also reflected in the Strategic Hamlet Program and the Vietnamese National Campaign Plan, which in 1963 called for offensive Search and Destroy operations<sup>5</sup>.

This fundamentally changed the nature of the program. It is important to understand that the Montagnards had a very difficult relationship with the South Vietnamese. Their motivation to fight came not from wanting to help the government in Saigon, they were fighting for the security of their homeland and for autonomy. The fact that they were now being sent on offensive missions, most of them close to the Laotian border, far away from their villages, meant that their villages remained unprotected.

To mitigate the risk for the Montagnard families, they were being sent to fortified villages, which, in the words of Michael Bengé, a USAID employee at the time, created a huge amount of resentment among the Montagnards<sup>6</sup>. The fighters were on missions far away from their villages, while their families were being put in camps, under the control of the hated Vietnamese.

### **Bureaucratic Burden**

There was another change that affected CIDG in early 1963. When the program had been run by the CIA, bureaucracy was not a major concern. The CIA operatives, who were all located in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, were very flexible when making decisions, communicating with headquarters or requesting and dispensing funds.

The organization of MACV was very different. Colonel Morton, [...] fully appreciated the political delicacy of CIDG expansion, but found himself immersed in the administrative and

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<sup>5</sup> Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: A Presentation to the Air War College National Security Forum for 1966, 06 May 1966, Folder 02, Box 01, Milton Adams Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0040102001>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Michael Bengé, 31 January 2002, Michael Bengé Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016]. p.17

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logistic complexities of Operation Switchback. (Ahern 2009 p.95) He had to deal with the vast U.S. Army and Department of Defense bureaucracies. For months he was unable to release funds because his budget had not been approved by the Pentagon. Also he received very low priority for air transport and was therefore constantly struggling to get helicopters to support him.<sup>7</sup> These bureaucratic problems obviously were not just a problem for the commanding officer of Operation Switchback, they were also a major source of frustration for the Montagnard fighters and their U.S. Special Forces advisors, at a time when Viet Cong activities were once again on the rise. (Kelly 1973 p.40)

### **SVA Involvement**

With the change in operational control, the CIA lost its influence on who would run the camps and units of CIDG. As a result, MACV, who was closely coordinating its efforts with SVA, appointed a number of Vietnamese Special Forces officers to positions of responsibility in the CIDG camps. These officers were deeply distrusted by the Montagnards. Firstly, they naturally distrusted the Vietnamese. But there was also another reason. The Vietnamese had always been uneasy about arming the Montagnards. When they were put in charge of the camps, the quality of the weapons and the amount of ammunition provided decreased significantly.<sup>8</sup>

It also became apparent that corruption in the camps was rampant. Vietnamese charged exorbitant prices for rotten foodstuff. They even kept back pay for families who had lost family members in the fighting.<sup>9</sup>

All of this increased the frustration of the Montagnards and a lot of them felt betrayed by the Americans, whom they had trusted and fought with.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Major General William B. Rosson, report to chief of staff, U.S. Army, "Special Warfare Field Visit to Vietnam and Okinawa, 13–30 January 1963," 30 January 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Michael Bengé, 31 January 2002, Michael Bengé Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016]. p.20

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Michael Bengé, 31 January 2002, Michael Bengé Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016]. p.21

<sup>10</sup> Kok Ksor. (2016). Interview with Kok Ksor, Leader of the Degar. Available from:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gau9WhrV\\_Ns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gau9WhrV_Ns),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTYcKu9XUBM>

[Accessed: 7/7/2016].

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## Westmoreland's Plan for Consolidation

By 1964, the U.S. Army had assumed full control of CIDG. Command of the program had been transferred to the 5th Special Forces Group that was setting up its headquarters in Nha Trang.<sup>11</sup> At the time, there were a number of other similar counterinsurgency programs being run in Vietnam. Programs such as Trail Watchers, Mountain Scouts, and Combat Intelligence Teams had been run by the CIA in cooperation with the SVA. These programs were mainly using Vietnamese for counterinsurgency operations.<sup>12</sup>

General Westmoreland, who had become deputy commander of MACV in January of 1964, was looking for a way to consolidate these programs. He did so early in 1964 and as a result, 5th Special forces assumed control of a nation-wide, rural border surveillance program, encompassing nearly 20,000 men with a budget of \$ 10 million a year. (Carr 2012 p.66)

This might have made the program more manageable for the U.S. Army. The fact that CIDG was now a country-wide program including many Vietnamese with a significant operational role for the SVA forces did nothing to reduce the Montagnards alienation.

## Montagnard Uprisings in '64 and '65

The level of frustration at the CIDG camps had constantly risen ever since Operation Switchback had started in the final months of 1962. Observers of the scene like Michael Bengé who was in Darlac Province during the summer of 1963, talks of the disillusionment of the Rhadé.<sup>13</sup> His account is unique because he had travelled to the region in the early 1960s and could see the difference. But the disillusionment is also reflected in interviews

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.military.com/special-operations/5th-special-forces-group.html>. [Accessed: 7/15/2016]

<sup>12</sup> Switchback Project MSGS 1963, 14 November 1963, Folder 08, Box 01, John Prados Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2500108001>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Michael Bengé, 31 January 2002, Michael Bengé Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from:

<<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016]. p.18

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with Kok Ksor, a Rhadé who today is the leader of the Degar Foundation, an organization that supports Montagnards causes.<sup>14</sup>

1964 was a pivotal year for the Montagnards. Some of the early leaders of their autonomy movement had been imprisoned by President Diem since 1957. After Diem had been deposed and assassinated in November 1963, the new government decided to release these political prisoners in early 1964. (Hickey 1982 p.93)

Unfortunately, General Khanh, the new leader of the ROV, did not go further in accommodating the demands of the Montagnards. The disillusionment remained.

Over the summer of 1964, the more militant elements of the autonomy movement formed the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées (FULRO), the United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races.

FULRO made its abrupt appearance in September 1964, when they staged the first of what was to be a series of revolts in CIDG camps and demonstrations in Ban Me Thuot, the Darlac Province capital.

These rebellions culminated in 1965, when a number of U.S. Special Forces were taken prisoners and more than 30 SVA soldiers were killed in CIDG camps. After these events, Y Bham Enuol, the leader of FULRO, as well as his inner circle went into hiding in Cambodia.

The news of the Rebellion in the CIDG camps obviously came at a bad time for the Americans. After the Gulf of Tonkin resolution had been passed by Congress in August, the United States were in the process of ramping up their presence.

This obvious disruption in the Highlands, where the news until then had been nothing but good, gave some people in the U.S. government pause. Initial reports from the scene to Washington DC had tried to lay the blame for the uprising on the Viet Cong<sup>15</sup>, but there was

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<sup>14</sup> Kok Ksor. (2016). Interview with Kok Ksor, Leader of the Degar. Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gau9WhrV\\_Ns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gau9WhrV_Ns)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTYcKu9XUBM> . [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

<sup>15</sup> Airgram from the American Embassy, Saigon to the Department of State: The Montagnard Rebellion in Darlac and Quang Duc Provinces, 16 October 1964, Folder 27, Box 03, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01 - Assessment and Strategy, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from: <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2120327007>>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

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no hiding the fact that the problems in the Highlands mostly homemade. Under Secretary George Ball, in a secret memorandum dated October 5, 1964 arguing against expanding military actions against North Vietnam, mentioned the Montagnard rebellion as an example of unintended consequences of expansion. As future events would show, his advice was not heeded. (Hickey 2002 p.160)

## **The Aftermath - CIDG after 1965**

### **CIDG 1965-1971**

Following the takeover of CIDG by MACV, the program combined all insurgency programs in South Vietnam. CIDG continued to expand through 1967. In August 1965, MACV reacted to the North Vietnamese change in strategy that started to include large scale conventional North Vietnamese Army (NVA) attacks in the South with the creation of a rapid reaction Mobile Strike Force at Pleiku camp. (Carr 2012 p.90) "Mike Force" as it was called, included more than 8,000 troops. The best CIDG troops usually being recruited for Mike Force, village defense was being depleted even further and this obviously weakened the rural countryside and made it receptive to communist propaganda and infiltration.

In 1969 the Nixon administration started its Vietnamization strategy, designed to hand over more of the fighting to SVA and to relieve American troops. MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff issued a combined plan to convert CIDG assets to Regional Force units starting on 1 June 1969. (Carr 2012 p.95) This completed the travesty that CIDG had become. What had started in 1962 as a civilian, irregular defense force was by 1969 neither civilian, irregular, defensive or a force.

### **The Montagnards**

The immediate aftermath of the rebellion brought few improvements for the tribes of the Central Highlands. As Michael Bengé explains, the Vietnamese demanded the U.S. Special Forces close all CIDG camps. This did not happen but still some of them were closed. Viet

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Cong activity, which had already been on the rise before the rebellion, intensified and many of the infiltration routes were opened due to the closing of the camps.<sup>16</sup>

It took another change in government in Saigon and the presidency of Nguyen van Thieu, for the relationship of the Montagnards and the South Vietnamese to improve. President Thieu granted minority status to the Montagnards and accepted some of their demands for political representation, courts and education. (Hickey 2002 p.135) This led to a normalization of relations until the early 1970s.

## Summary

The fact that America's counterinsurgency experience in Vietnam has been both successful and a failure makes its lessons very valuable, because we can study the changes the program went through and their impact.

The major change analyzed in this paper is Operation Switchback, which moved command and control of CIDG from the CIA to MACV from mid-1962 to 1963. The analysis provided in this paper makes a case that the eventual decline of CIDG had its root in Operation Switchback. The major change was one of organization. Where the CIA had a relatively small team administering the program's logistics and finances, MACV was a huge military bureaucracy with rigid processes. But there was something else. The Buon Enao project, precursor of CIDG, had been very much attuned to the Montagnard's situation and sensibilities, a real population-centric insurgency program. The people at MACV never understood that by changing CIDG's strategy to offensive operations, they were changing the entire nature of the program and alienating the very people whose help they were counting on.

To summarize, I believe that there are three lessons that can be drawn from the U.S. counterinsurgency experience in Vietnam.

- 1) Over the longer term, only population-centric counterinsurgency programs will work, because the goal of the programs need to be aligned with the goals of the

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Michael Bengé, 31 January 2002, Michael Bengé Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available from: <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0207>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016]. p.30



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people that fight it, this is all the more true in countries, where there are different ethnicities

- 2) Counterinsurgency programs should never be managed by big military bureaucracies, their very nature needs flexibility and speed of decision that are impossible in big bureaucracies
- 3) Beware of cultural, racial, religious and other differences when consolidating different groups into one counterinsurgency program

Every war is different, and lessons from any conflict should always be analyzed in their own context, but I do believe that America's Buon Enao and CIDG experiences in Vietnam provide valuable lessons, especially in today's context of global terrorism and asymmetric high-tech warfare.

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## Definition of Terms

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FULRO	Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées
GVN	Government of Vietnam
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
ROV	Republic of Vietnam
SOV	State of Vietnam
SVA	South Vietnamese Army

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