

“Lotus in a Sea of Fire”: U.S. Army Mobile Advisory Teams and Territorial Soldiers in Viet Nam

Uyen H. Nguyen, Ph.D.¹
Texas Tech University

Throughout the prolonged bloody timeline of the Vietnam/American War, the year 1967 witnessed two pivotal events, both of which proved to us rather decisively that we cannot separate the military and civil aspects of the conflict. As in this highly complex struggle, multiple dimensions, such as social, economic, political, and military dimensions - were intricately interconnected. The first event was the publication of the book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* by the renowned Thich Nhat Hanh, who has been known worldwide for studying, living, and teaching concepts such as “engaged Buddhism” and “mindfulness.”² This book expressed the desire and struggle for a lasting, meaningful peace of the majority of Vietnamese people who were suffering tremendously and got entangled in the middle of this horrific multidimensional conflict; and, they did not want to take any sides. As observed from his 1965 trip when he went up the Thu Bon river to visit some remote villages – Son Thuan, Khuong Binh, and Ca Tang, peasants in these villages hated both the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Government of Republic of Vietnam (GVN) sides. When being asked which side they would follow, some peasants responded to Thich Nhat Hanh that: “We do not follow either. We follow the one who can end the war and guarantee that we can live.”³ This feeling of the Vietnamese people, reported by Thich Nhat Hanh, was very similar to what a U.S. Army’s Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) member who served in team MAT-IV-32 in Tram

¹ This article is a condensed version of the lecture delivered on February 24, 2022, for INISEG Vietnam War International Seminar online. Further details from this lecture are from Dr. Nguyen’s dissertation research.

² I quoted the title of Thich Nhat Hanh’s first published book in English in my presentation in tribute to his lifelong advocacy for lasting peace for mankind in general and for the Vietnamese people in particular, as this respectable Teacher has just finished his journey on earth and passed away earlier this year on January 22, 2022.

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in A Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 65.

Chim village, Kien Phong province, observed in 1969: “The farmers and fishermen in my district wanted to be left alone so they could work to provide for their families. They were not political and most of them would fall in line with whoever was in power.”⁴

The second event in the year 1967 was the creation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) on May 28, 1967. This office, under the direction of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was responsible for providing military and civil support of pacification in Vietnam. It was the first time in the war that the United States formally integrated civil and military advisory efforts in support of GVN’s pacification programs into one single command. CORDS unified a wide range of various programs which had been operating independently, at times disjointedly, by either military or civilian agencies previously in South Vietnam. CORDS had twelve directories that encompassed multiple American advisory elements: such as: Territorial Forces, Chieu Hoi “Open Arms” Amnesty Program, Education, Health, Agriculture, etc. In October 1967, CORDS created a new program called the Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) to train the South Vietnamese territorial forces.⁵

As this program came out when the war was approaching its Vietnamization phase and many American personnel were being withdrew, so manpower and resources were very limited. MAT team structure was relatively small. Each team consisted of typically only five American members: two officers, three enlisted men, and an assigned Vietnamese Army interpreter. MATs had a challenging mission job in Viet Nam stretching their limited manpower and resources very thin most of the time. For example, with five men, if one were already being on radio watch at the team house,

⁴ David Donovan, *Once A Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985), p.19.

⁵ A. G. Hume (Brigadier General, US Army, Deputy Chief of Staff, OPS), “Chronological Outline of the RF/PF Advisor Build-Up,” 28 December 1970, RG 472, Entry A1-785, Box 38, Folder: 1009-01 USARV Advisor School, Tab C, p. 1, National Archive II.

there would be only two of a two-man teams left to rotate between accompanying local units on daylight operations, night ambushes, on top of other advisory duties every day. Towards the end of the war, many MATs were downsized to only three-man teams.

Mobile Advisory Teams had multifaceted missions including both combat and non-combat, both civil and military elements. Being army field advisors, their primary mission was to advise and instruct their advisees soldiers on field fortifications, barrier systems, indirect fire support, and small unit operations with emphasis on night operations and ambushes, patrols, weapons employment, emergency medical care. Besides providing combat assistance and training on infantry techniques, MAT advisors also helped local officials - like village or hamlet chiefs - develop their defense plans, collaborated with various agencies in the village like for intelligence operations, and supported civic actions, or community development projects – building schools, setting up healthcare clinics, developing agricultural programs, improve the villagers' living conditions. As 1st Lt. George Gandenberger, team leader of MAT IV-29 in Go Cong province in 1969 in the Mekong Delta region, expressed, the creation of MAT really helped to address a long-standing issue in the way the American approached the conflict overlooking many intricacies and complexities of the local population:

For too long we didn't pay enough attention to the needs of the Vietnamese population and the local forces that could protect them. We concentrated on the military conflict through main force, attrition warfare, and didn't see that the drivers of the conflict might be a need for clean water, improved agriculture, functioning markets and even an improved self-image.⁶

⁶ Terry T. Turner, "At the Leading Edge of Counterinsurgency," *History Net*, August 29, 2017 - Accessed 9/5/2022. <https://www.historynet.com/leading-edge-counterinsurgency/>

Operating right in the middle of many rural villages and hamlets, MAT advisors lived with the Vietnamese civilian communities and fought alongside their local advisee soldiers and indigenous units. They had to face a unique set of challenges – including but not limited to physical danger and exhaustion, constant mental stress, and psychological terror from the irregular warfare. Their daily adversaries were consisted of both People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) main-force units from the North and NLF insurgents in the South. MAT advisors had to build a mutually trusting relationship with their local counterparts to survive themselves and to help their Vietnamese advisees and their families to survive.

Another huge challenge for MAT advisor was language barrier. Although some of them might already have had the benefit of attending a Vietnamese language course in the States through the Defense Language Institute, and each MAT team was often having an assigned local translator, linguistic barriers remained very high. As one advisor observed:

There are the cultural differences that can make even simple social exchanges exhausting because you must constantly be on guard against the inadvertent offense to your counterparts and the local people, and be certain that you are being understood, and that your intent is not being clouded by some nuance missed in translation.⁷

Each MAT advisor’s experiences in Viet Nam varied significantly depending on many variables, such as: where they were in Vietnam, when they were there, how the local conditions and situations were... For instance, if a MAT was operating near a regular unit base camp, such as the Seabees, that team could possibly receive more support and share food and resources. MATs had to learn from and adapt to many differences across South Vietnam, from macro to micro levels -- such as regional geography, cultural traditions, various ethnic groups, political-religious sects, local

⁷ David Donovan, *Once A Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985), p. 102.

security situations, etc. For example, the history of a nuanced balance between the number enemy forces hiding in the jungles surrounding a village and the number of friendly forces inside the village, etc. also impacted how each MAT team organize their training activities and daily operations differently. Some MATs stayed in an area for around 4-6 months then moved to another area, but some other MAT might have rarely moved and remained mostly static throughout their tour. Some districts could have no MATs assigned if they were closer to their province's capitol and were considered more secure. In certain situations, a MAT team's mission would focus more on static defense, such as securing a bridge or some strategic locations surrounding one specific village, rather than mobile patrols across a wider range of several villages in other situations. The allied strategy of defensive in the context of employing small advisory units like MATs was carrying an offensive seed in itself; because providing local security to the South Vietnamese population across each hamlet and village also meant denying the enemy every vital drop of vitality, keeping the enemies from taking control over the land, the resources, and the people, the foundation for establishing a country.

Similar to their fellow American advisors who were assigned to regular Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) divisional units, MAT advisors were designed to function only within an advisory capacity, not in a commanding position to their respective Vietnamese counterparts. MAT's advisees were comprised of three main groups of South Vietnamese territorial units. Territorial forces were badly neglected until late 1967 when Vietnamization and pacification came more into the forefront. The creation of CORDS and MAT laid an important foundation for the build-up of these local units, especially post-1968. The first group were the Regional Forces (RF) companies operating across around 236 districts within the 44 provinces. The Regional Forces came from Civil Guard (CG) under the First Republic era of South Vietnam. This was a para-military

coalition which was activated in April 1955 with 68,000 men from various elements of the First Indo-China War period, including the Vietnamese National Army, French Union Forces, and discharged auxiliary forces (Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, etc.). Within just three years, the RF grew from 98,000 in 1967 to double its size 184,000 in 1970. By 1973, at the time when all American combat soldiers had left Vietnam, there were a total of 360 RF battalions that had been formed and fully employed.⁸ They bore the bigger burden of combat deaths, accounting for 55% of the South Vietnamese KIA for the period of 1965-1972, while the regular forces accounted for about the remaining 45 percent.⁹ In the last few years of the war, RF force structure was strongly developed from separate companies to company groups, to battalions, and even “mobile groups” at the province level, as some MAT advisors in IV Corps remember advising some Vietnamese reaction forces which was called “Lien/Linh Doi.”

The second group of MAT’s advisees were the Popular Forces (PF) platoons who operated across some 2,500 villages within the districts. These PF units trace their roots to the Self-Defense Corps (SDC) of 48,000 men created in 1956 under the Ministry of Interior.¹⁰ PF force level was buildup at the same time with the introduction and development of the MAT program, from 134,000 in 1967 to almost double of 226,000 in 1970. They were originally organized as a cell varying from four to ten men per village of around one thousand population. Their tasks were helping to maintain security within their village, such as manning the outposts, or guarding the bridges... of around 2,500 villages across South Vietnam. Together with the RF, Popular Force also made a major contribution to the allied efforts during the war. The RF/PF were arguably the most cost-effective

⁸ Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Center of Military History, 1981), p. 40.

⁹ Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 106.

¹⁰ Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Center of Military History, 1981), p. 30.

military forces employed on the allied side because they inflicted around 12 to 30% of enemy combat deaths, depending on the year, while receiving only up to 4 % of the total budget resources.¹¹ The period from 1967 to 1972 featured an increase of interest in population security, but on the overall scale, even at their height from 1968 to 1971, pacification and population security efforts did not account for more than one-eighth of the allies' resources spending; and from the longer stretch from 1961 to 1973, expenditures on population security alone took no more than one-tenth of the war's overall budget.¹²

The last group of MAT's advisees was the People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) operating across around 12,000 hamlets within the villages. The concept of PSDF was a strategic transition in hoping that as these local militia could help protect their own communities and take over the role of home-guarding security, PSDF would free other RF/PF for movement farther out into the countryside or mobilized in joint operation with the Vietnamese regular units. The U.S. Army's leaders hoped that MAT advisors, operating from the foundation of popular support, would be able to encourage and involve these local people more in the common defense of their own families and communities. However, perhaps one of the most important and complex aspects, which often was understudied, is that this engagement and involvement had to be done essentially in a Vietnamese way, respecting the local dynamics, and not be predominantly in an American way - in order to yield any meaningful results for the South Vietnamese people's long-term peace and security. As in the poignant and thought-provoking title of Thich Nhat Hanh's book - *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, who

¹¹ Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 165.

¹² Lawrence E. Grinter, "Vietnam: The Cost of Ignoring the Political Requirements," in *The American War in Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies, and Implications for Future Conflicts*, ed. Lawrence E. Grinter and Peter M. Dunn (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 41.

knows how to defend and preserve the Vietnamese lotus better than the Vietnamese people themselves?

Fighting motivation of these PSDF units was rather complicated, just like many other controversial topics of this traumatic and complex conflict. However, one cannot undermine the context of the General Mobilization post-Tet Offensive and the pressure to quickly expand the force level of RVNAF in the face of U.S. withdrawal. The Saigon draft was expanded to men from 18 to 38 years old; and by the end of 1968, statistics showed that one in six adult males in the South had served in the ARVN. The rest of 16-17 year-old youth or older men from 39-45 were called up for the militias or some technical support service.¹³ The draft also recalled veterans of either age brackets if having no documented disabilities and had no specified length of required service, meaning these drafted soldiers had to serve until the war is over!

These territorial soldiers at the lowest ranks of the military consistently accounted for the lowest desertion rates because they were part-time soldiers and lived close to home, with an empathetic unit leader and lenient, flexible leadership style, these soldiers could go home to help with their families working in the rice fields during harvest seasons. To fully understand the territorial soldiers' morale and desire to serve near home, one has to have a deep understanding of Vietnamese history and culture. Very rare any American soldier or advisors had this understanding before being deployed to Vietnam. For example, the people's concept of "hiếu," or a moral obligation and devotion to ancestors and families. As a South Vietnamese soldier explained: "My primary role in life is to provide for my family and to venerate my ancestors. It was very difficult to leave the village. I would rather have died with my family at home than leave them and not be able

¹³ Permanent Bureau of People's Self-Defense National Committee, "Instructions on How to Handle People's Self-Defense Corps," pp.8-10, RG 472, A1-682, B. 55, Folder: 1605-04A: RF/PF Advisory Files – People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) Program, 1968, NARA.

to care for them.”¹⁴ In many cases, these local soldiers’ morale was naturally high because they often had a personal attachment to their ancestral homeland and family. When being asked the reasons why he joined the PSDF, a 37 year-old farmer in Khang Tang hamlet in the Delta province of Ba Xuyen, provided a practical and heartfelt answer: “I have 7 good reasons for devoting some 40 hours each week to the defense of this hamlet: My wife, our five children, and my home.”



A PSDF soldier carrying a rifle in one arm and his children in the other ¹⁵

This PSDF squad leader was one of these “people in the middle” that MAT advisors got to work with very closely and helped defending and bringing a safer, better everyday life to their

¹⁴ Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), p. 52.

¹⁵ Photograph, VA002186. Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive. No Date, Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VA002186>, Accessed 12 Apr 2021.

families. The phrase “people in the middle” comes from an incredible memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, written by Le Ly Hayslip, a Vietnamese refugee, writer, and philanthropist:

Long before you arrived, my country had yielded to the terrible logic of war. What for you was normal – a life of peace and plenty – was for us a hazy dream known only in our legends. Because we had to appease the allied forces by day and were terrorized by Viet Cong at night, we slept as little as you did. We obeyed both sides and wound up pleasing no one. We were people in the middle. We were what the war was all about.¹⁶

MAT advisor observed very closely the human costs of war and a devastating spectrum of horror and sorrow that the war inflicted on these people every day. They got to ask, to learn, and reflect about “what this war was about?” from the bottom-up perspective that many other Americans did not have that opportunity. What the war was about? The answers can be very different depended on who you asked the question. If you asked some high-level decision-makers, the answers would probably be their geopolitical concerns and strategic arguments, such as the “domino theory”. But what if you ask the people on the ground, for example, an American field advisor or a Vietnamese villager? For many Vietnamese people, the war was about family survival. As one Vietnamese soldier wrote in a letter to his wife: “The war is about you and our family. I know that the war will end one day, and then we can resume our normal life.”¹⁷

Civilian engagement played an instrumental role in the endgame of any counter-insurgency operations. In interacting with these “people in the middle,” MAT advisors went through a dual process of learning and unlearning: unlearning the things they carried, either consciously or unconsciously into the job, and realize that some biases or assumptions about the local population’s

¹⁶ Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: a Vietnamese Woman’s Journey from War to Peace*, 2003 ed. (New York, NY: Plum Books, 1990), p. xiv.

¹⁷ Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), p.117.

“hearts and minds” were inaccurate comparing to their reality; and learning new things about the Vietnamese people with a deeper sense of compassion, empathy, and understanding.

For example, many GIs assumed that the Vietnamese people might have become callous to human sufferings and feelings after many years of living in the middle of a brutal war. In contrast, many MAT advisors learned from their own observations that these Vietnamese mom and dad, just like any other parents of any nationalities around the world, love and care deeply for their children. A MAT IV-25 advisor in Dinh Tuong province remembers a heart-breaking story happened in the later phase of his tour, around March 1972, when many U.S. regular troops and advisors were already started being withdrew or phased out, and the remaining personnel in Vietnam were stretched very thin. His team was assigned with a Vietnamese interpreter who lived on the compound with his wife and two small children and had become a trusted, good friend with the American MAT team leader. One day a couple of U.S. Captains from the District Advisory Team 66 S-3 came by and asked to borrow his interpreter to use on an operation the next day. The group left early in the next morning and were ambushed on the way back; the Vietnamese interpreter was killed and one of the U.S. Captains was wounded.¹⁸

In addition to losing his personal friend and interpreter for the whole team, MAT advisor carried the responsibility to inform the fallen interpreter’s family the devastating news that their son/husband/father was killed. The interpreter’s dead body was brought to this advisor to give to the local family in the hamlet. His mother could not understand how her son was shot in the head during the heated days of the Tet Offensive 1968 and still lived, but was shot in the leg, this time with the “Cố-Vấn Mỹ,” the Vietnamese words for “American Advisor,” and died. Medically, the unfortunate

¹⁸ A MAT veteran, oral history interviewed by author, February 2019.

soldier/interpreter was suffering from a femoral artery wound and was bleeding to death.

Psychologically, the MAT advisor could never give a satisfying answer to the many questions of the Vietnamese shocked and grieving mother, which is something traumatically difficult that the now MAT veteran has to live with for over half a century until today. This one tragic story, among many other oral histories that the author have conducted with MAT veterans, illuminates a cross-cultural and civil-military interwoven insight of the war's human dimension in which MAT advisors played a uniquely important role in this critical juncture of the prolonged conflict. They were not there just teaching the local soldiers how to shoot a rifle or operate some military equipment. They were not there to just call-in artillery and air support as some simplified narratives might have provided an umbrella description of their roles. MAT advisors, in the unique historical context that they were serving, were there as first and foremost compassionate and empathetic humans, representing somebody who was trustworthy and caring enough to feel for and feel with the plights of the Vietnamese people, to provide specific assistance for the villager's daily needs. They were also the ones whom the local people entrusted with their safety and many aspects of their everyday life in the middle of a bloody dangerous and traumatizing warzone. From the bottom-up perspective of the human experiences in this multifaceted war, MAT was arguably an important part of the Vietnamese people's hope for a genuine and lasting peace.

Vietnam's national flower is the lotus, growing in muddy water and rising above the dark surface with strong roots and delicate yet sustainable petals aiming for sun light. The lotus symbolizes the Vietnamese values of integrity, purity, and resiliency in hardship. Those who served with the U.S. Army's Mobile Advisory Teams in Vietnam were among very few Americans during the war that got to learn and understand the true spirit of that Vietnamese lotus amidst "the sea of fire" of warfare in the most close-up and truthful manners for themselves. These MAT advisors had

an insightful familiarity and realistic knowledge of their Vietnamese allies not from any training manuals but rather based on countless cross-cultural interactions and incidents in real life, based on what they saw by their own eyes, how they felt by their own hearts, that many other American service members never had. One of the most profound and lasting impacts from the MAT service in Vietnam is that because of their operating environment - living with in close proximity, and fighting alongside the local people, they got to see the Vietnamese through a more truthful and compassionate lens. They had the unique opportunity to understand the impacts of the war on the Vietnamese people from all sides and become more empathize with the local people's unimaginable situations, their desire and struggle for peace that Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about in *Lotus in A Sea of Fire*. The more these MAT advisors understood, the more they empathized; the more they empathized, the more they understood. In other words, the basic, shared humanity laying deep inside each combatant and civilian was one of the key reasons for MAT advisors to be able to do their incredibly challenging missions in the complex environment of the unconventional war in Viet Nam. This shared humanity is also an important factor to foster a deeper understanding as to why many of these advisors continue to struggle and engage with post-war memories and legacies, returning and helping Vietnamese people, children, ethnic minorities, and disabled veterans through various non-governmental charitable organizations. Many of these veterans also tirelessly continue to seek for inner peace and healing in the aftermath of the war, finding their Vietnamese interpreters, counterparts and friends, and working through other complex issues related to their service time in Vietnam, such as post-traumatic stress and moral injury.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Moral Injury" has been defined as "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/newsletters/research-quarterly/v23n1.pdf>). For more information on the concept of "moral injury" and its effects on the veterans and their families, please see: Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

The U.S. Army has conducted many studies about the failures and successes of American military advising missions. Many lessons could be drawn from the Vietnam War, among which building a strong relationship with local counterparts is one of the most important aspects of the advising mission.²⁰ But what does “a strong relationship” mean specifically? There are no finite answers to this question with varied units in varied contexts, but this military history of the U.S. Army’s Mobile Advisory Teams in Vietnam demonstrates that a strong relationship between advisors and advisees consists of elements beyond just military capability; it must be built on a solid foundation of mutual understanding and genuine empathy between the two groups of human beings. Linguistic familiarity, cultural awareness, and historical knowledge are some of the pillars that could help building such a foundation. MAT servicemen represented a strong example of an evolutionary generation of combat advisors, who pushed the traditional boundaries of advising and took on much more complex and challenging roles of being simultaneously the cultural ambassador, the military advisor, the logistical coordinator, the medical assistant, and many other crucial roles in assisting and supporting the local forces and civilians in respective host countries. As historian Gregory Daddis acknowledges the overwhelming multiple roles that the American advisors often had to assume in Viet Nam: “An advisor was all at once a military trainer, a political representative, a counselor and administrator, and a funnel through which US funds and support flowed.”²¹

Historical trajectory of the MAT program went from its initial proposal in 1967, then evolved into a full-swing application across all four military regions, with the maturation peak of 1969-1970, then to its ending in 1972. This trajectory demonstrates that in order to effectively wage both war

²⁰ Lt. Col. Remi Haiiar, U.S. Army, “What Lessons Learn (or Re-Learn) About Military Advising After 9/11?” *Military Review*, November-December 2014.

http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20141231_art013.pdf

²¹ Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 157.

and peace in South Vietnam, the Americans needed to move beyond their fixation on any non-human, clear-cut, unidimensional aspect, such as statistics of troops strength, and face the ugliness and messiness of warfare. Human dimension in the conflict required them to invest more resources in studying and understanding other complex issues at both big and small levels in a multidimensional, human-oriented picture. These complexities could cover a wide range of multiple factors, such as systemic barriers of cultural and linguistic knowledge to the everchanging factors in each area, such as ideological and environmental conditions. The story of MAT reminds us that conflicts between two nations cannot, and should not, be solely resolved with military might. The highly diverse roles that MATs played in Vietnam demonstrates that in contemporary counterinsurgency operations overseas, the ability of America as a foreign ally to simultaneously assist and train host-country's soldiers, engage and learn from the population, while confronting the enemy at micro levels, such as the rural villages and hamlets of South Vietnam, is of paramount importance.