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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*The Status of the North Vietnamese Divisions
in Coastal II Corps*

~~**Secret**~~

23

25 November 1967
No. 1398/67

WARNING

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
25 November 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Status of the North Vietnamese Divisions in Coastal
II Corps

Summary

During the past two years, allied military forces have inflicted extremely heavy casualties on the three North Vietnamese divisions located in the central coastal provinces of South Vietnam. As a result, the combat effectiveness of these units has been drastically cut and their ability to mount concentrated, regimental-size attacks virtually eliminated.

The direct control which the Communist units exerted over most of the rural populace along the coast in mid-1965, when the South Vietnamese Army was faced with near total disaster in the area, has been broken. Roads are now generally open to the movement of allied military units and the enemy's major forces have been pushed into a posture of near constant maneuver operations in order to avoid allied offensives.

There has been some progress in the reassertion of government control and influence among the rural populace lost to the enemy, but it has been slow, very limited in scope, and vulnerable to quick erosion as a result of continuing enemy operations in the populous coastal lowlands. The North Vietnamese regiments in the area are still capable, either independently or in conjunction with local Viet Cong units, of small-scale operations within and on the fringes of the populated sectors. Partly as a result of their operations, security has deteriorated in most of the coastal provinces during the last few months, with some pacification areas overrun by enemy forces.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Economic Research, the Office of National Estimates, and the Director's Special Adviser for Vietnamese Affairs.

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By dint of continuing replacements, Hanoi has managed to keep the numerical strength of the NVA coastal divisions to within about 70 percent of the strength at which they infiltrated South Vietnam. Although the individual quality of the replacements is now far below past standards, the divisions are still formidable units and, given a respite from military pressure, would probably quickly recover their offensive punch.

There seems little reason to believe that the divisions will lose their ability to conduct and support small-scale operations until the allies are able to shift enough military forces into the coastal provinces to destroy the regimental and main force apparatus. Present levels of Communist military operations, moreover, will probably be sufficient to block any really extensive and sustained advance of pacification in the area.

The outlook is thus for continuing, indecisive warfare in the central coastal area during the foreseeable future.

-2-

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Entry of North Vietnamese Units Into II Corps

1. Hanoi began to bolster the Communist military position in the central coastal provinces of South Vietnam late in 1964 when it started the infiltration of some six North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infantry regiments into the area from Da Nang south to Nha Trang. The movement spanned a 15-month period and was not completed until about March 1966. At the outset, Hanoi's strategy called for the use of these and other NVA units infiltrated during the same period in a determined push for a quick military victory, hopefully before the end of 1966. The objective was to overwhelm the South Vietnamese Army which was seriously weakened from battlefield reverses during 1964.

2. The North Vietnamese deployments into the central provinces followed a strategically sound plan. The highland sector of this region formed the terminus of the Laotian infiltration and supply routes. Domination of the highlands eastward into the coastal provinces would provide a secure base from which to launch attacks on the rice-rich population centers along the seacoast. Binh Dinh Province with nearly 800,000 people and Quang Ngai Province with at least 650,000 were particularly attractive targets. Domination of these provinces, along with control of the highlands, would have provided large reservoirs of food and manpower to the Communists and would have virtually cut South Vietnam in half, isolating the northern portion of the country.

3. The first of the incoming North Vietnamese units scored a number of important victories. The NVA 95th Regiment, for example, participated in several devastating attacks on government regular army units near Route 19 in Pleiku Province in early 1965 before moving on into Binh Dinh. Its actions and presence, moreover, emboldened local Viet Cong main force units into a round of offensive activity against government paramilitary positions. By the end of March 1965, the Communists had effectively interdicted all the major transportation routes in the II Corps area; they firmly controlled Route 19

-3-

No Foreign Dissem

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No Foreign Dissem

which provides the main east-west access through valley approaches to the populous coastal districts of Tuy Phuoc, Phu My, and Phu Cat, in Binh Dinh.

4. In April, the 18th NVA Regiment, coordinating its actions with local Viet Cong troops, severely mauled several South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) battalions in Binh Dinh and even threatened the provincial capital of Qui Nhon. Increasingly effective terrorism and Communist control measures were reported throughout the central coastal provinces by May. To the north, in Quang Ngai Province, a battle took place in June outside the provincial capital during which 13 Communist battalions were reported in the combat area. Total ARVN losses in this engagement were over 600, while enemy casualties were under 100. Three government battalions were knocked out.

5. To all intents and purposes, the ARVN was forced into an almost totally defensive posture throughout the central coastal provinces; large-scale security operations were nearly abandoned and the populace was left open to Communist domination. By July, the government military situation in the area was exceedingly grave. In Quang Ngai, for example, government control--even by day--extended only to the provincial capital, the district towns, and a few isolated outposts. Pacification activities had all but ceased, with 62 hamlets previously considered secure lost to the enemy during June alone. Communist strength in Quang Ngai totaled over 12,000 and, numerically, was nearly equal to that of the government. Some 100,000 refugees from the Communist-controlled areas were clustered around the district towns and provincial capital. Even there, however, they had little security.

The Introduction of US Combat Forces

6. To meet the Communist threat in this and other sectors, American combat troops were sent into South Vietnam. A substantial part of the initial American commitment was deployed into the central provinces where their first tactical objective was to reopen Route 19 and punch some badly needed supplies through to besieged government posts

-4-

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in the highlands. After a series of clearing operations along Route 19, US and ARVN convoys, backed by a division-size escort, managed to move through from Qui Nhon to Pleiku on 23 July 1965.

7. In retrospect, July 1965 can be seen as the high-water mark of Communist success in the central coastal provinces. From this point onward, the combat effectiveness of the enemy main forces began to decline and their ability to mount sustained offensives in regimental echelon, or even in battalion strength, steadily eroded. As noted below, there is a vast difference between the situation today and the near-hopeless government military position in the area in mid-1965. Roads are now generally open to allied military movements and the enemy's major units have been forced into nearly continuous maneuver operations in order to avoid allied actions. There has also been some progress in the reassertion of government control and influence among the rural populace although, as indicated below, the continued viability of the NVA units, among other factors, has made the expansion and maintenance of security in the central coastal area tenuous at best.

8. The Communists clearly recognized from the start that the introduction of US combat units into the central coastal area posed a substantial new challenge to their strategy, and were not long in reacting. They decided to move in close to the American installations where possible, hoping by harassment and guerrilla-type defenses in depth to impede and stall US offensives against Communist main force units. By August 1965, a considerable increase in sightings of VC units around US installations at such places as Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai was reported.

9. Late in August 1965, the first big engagement occurred between US and Communist main forces in the central coastal area. As part of the "anti-American belt" the enemy had attempted to draw around US facilities, the Viet Cong's 1st Regiment (eventually to become part of the NVA 2nd Division) had deployed into the lowlands south

-5-

No Foreign Dissem
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of the Chu Lai Air Base. A joint sea and ground operation by American units caught the VC 1st on the Van Tuong Peninsula south of the base, and drastic casualties--US claims ran to over 900--were inflicted on the regiment before it could withdraw.

10. The battle rather conclusively demonstrated the real vulnerability of Communist units based in the lowlands in concentrated elements. In reaction the enemy attempted to adopt more flexible, maneuver-type tactics that would permit quick sallies from isolated mountain base areas into the coastal region with a view to blocking any firm extension of government control over the populace. These actions were also designed to show that allied security for the populace was inadequate and permitted continued Communist intimidation and exploitation of the people. In general, this has continued to be the over-all Communist strategy in the central coastal region, even though the enemy's military position in the area has declined substantially since the Van Tuong battle. In essence, he is seeking to outlast the allies in the struggle and, even with forces of reduced effectiveness, to block friendly units from achieving a decisive and lasting success in any important sector.

11. Although the Communist offensive was stalled in the early fall of 1965 by the entry of American units, the Communist units remained largely intact throughout the rest of the year. There was, in fact, a substantial growth in the strength and organizational apparatus of the enemy regular units in the area during the period. The 21st and 22nd NVA regiments followed the 18th and 95th into the coastal plains late in 1965. The last two units to infiltrate were the 18B and 3rd regiments which arrived in February and March of 1966. The 21st and 3rd regiments deployed to the Quang Tin - Quang Ngai region south of Da Nang where they combined with the existing Viet Cong 1st Regiment to form the 2nd NVA Division. The 18th and 22nd regiments combined with the Viet Cong 2nd Regiment in the southern Quang Ngai - Binh Dinh Province area forming the 3rd NVA Division. The 5th NVA Division was formed in the Phu Yen - Khanh Hoa Province region from the 95th

-6-

No Foreign Dissem
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and 18B regiments. The 5th Division has no third regiment, but it has operated in close coordination with the very active Viet Cong 30th Main Force Battalion.

12. There is no conclusive proof that the infiltration of all six regiments was programmed prior to the commitment of American combat forces along the central coast. It is probable, however, that it was preplanned in connection with Hanoi's hopes of forcing an early military decision in the conflict. Hanoi probably estimated that NVA forces, in a strength of at least six regiments, could live off the terrain and could maintain sufficiently secure bases in the coastal area, if they were backed up with supplies of ammunition and weapons they needed from external sources. It seems likely that this estimate would have proved correct had not the addition of major US increments of manpower, mobility, and firepower altered the situation, leaving no base area in the coastal provinces, nor any supply route, with really adequate security for the Communists.

13. Assuming that the over-all NVA infiltration into the area was preplanned there was certainly good reason in late 1965 for the Communists to complete it in an effort to checkmate the introduction of American forces. Although the divisional-type organizations formed in the area by the Communists during this period could hardly be called divisions in the conventional Western sense of the term--their heaviest weapons, for example, were mortars and recoilless rifles--they were self-contained organizations capable of coordinating and sustaining operations over a wide area. Throughout the remaining months of 1965, elements of the enemy divisions, in cooperation with local forces, mounted sporadic battalion and multibattalion attacks on ARVN units and installations and kept the government on the defensive.

Sustained Allied Offensives

14. The significant era in the decline of Communist military power in the central coastal

-7-

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provinces did not begin until early 1966. The first major allied offensive operations to trap and destroy the NVA coastal divisions were launched in January in northern Binh Dinh Province. The target was the NVA 3rd Division with a strength of at least 5,000 men and probably more. In a series of operations--codenamed MASHER/WHITE WING, THAYER, and IRVING--very heavy casualties were inflicted on the 3rd Division and it was forced into a largely defensive posture. The result of the operations in Binh Dinh was to break, rather definitively, the direct hold which the Communists had on the local population. The war was far from won in the province, however, since the allied clearing operations against the main forces outpaced their ability to follow up with a firmly maintained expansion of government control and influence throughout the populous area.

15. Government forces could now move with relative ease through the area, but little solid progress was made toward establishing permanent village and hamlet security against the VC or in committing the people to the government in an active sense. Officially, the pacification goal was actually reached in Binh Dinh for 1966. However, because of the low base from which the allies were building, the lack of personnel, and other inhibiting factors, the goal involved the securing of only 63 hamlets and the "consolidation" of another 12 in just three of the seven districts of the province. Most allied officials, nevertheless, regarded Binh Dinh and neighboring Phu Yen Province as the scene of the greatest allied successes during 1966. This view was clearly justified in view of the even smaller pacification gains made in most other areas of the country.

16. From a wholly military standpoint, moreover, the situation in the war against the enemy main forces in the central coastal area was not entirely favorable to the allies. The North Vietnamese were able to replace a substantial portion of their 1966 manpower losses and maintain the threat of their division in Binh Dinh, even though its effectiveness was cut drastically by the poor quality of the replacements and by the loss of supplies and weapons to the allied sweep forces. Also, the better part

-8-

No Foreign Dissem
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of all the available maneuver battalions of the US 1st Cavalry Division was tied up during the year in the various sweep operations against the 3rd Division. They were backed up at times by US Marine forces, Korean Army elements, and other allied units.

17. The mission of the American maneuver battalions was primarily that of engaging the enemy main forces, but there could be no thought that the task was ending in this area and that US units, in the foreseeable future, could be permanently deployed elsewhere to assist in operations against other enemy regular units. Nor was it thought that they could be used in any strength in this area to assist the largely ineffective ARVN in establishing and maintaining tight and reassuring security in the populated lowlands. The rate of attrition of American forces--a key factor in Communist hopes to sway US opinion against the war--was also not wholly satisfactory from the allied point of view. Over 700 Americans were killed in the six major search-and-destroy operations conducted in Binh Dinh against the NVA 3rd Division during 1966. This was approximately 14 percent of the total American deaths suffered in South Vietnam during the year. The losses were taken in fighting about 9 percent of the enemy's main force strength.

18. As 1966 ended it was clear to the allies that the NVA 3rd, while hurt seriously, had managed to stay in the field. If the pressure were lifted and substantial numbers of allied forces diverted elsewhere, the Communists would soon dominate the area again provided they had only to oppose the South Vietnamese Government forces normally assigned to the province. Efforts continued during 1967, primarily in the form of Operation PERSHING, to keep the 3rd Division on the defensive and perhaps to destroy it along with other VC forces in the province. In the course of this offensive, additional, large casualties have been inflicted on the division and it has been forced to deploy over a wide area, thus drastically reducing the possibility that it can be concentrated for a successful large-scale attack.

-9-

No Foreign Dissem

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19. At the present time, the 22nd Regiment of the division is believed to be scattered in small groups in the Bong Son plains of northern Binh Dinh, attempting to secure rice. The 18th and 2nd regiments--the latter a Viet Cong unit which has been heavily reinforced with North Vietnamese replacements--remain deployed in Phu My and Phu Cat districts along the southern coast of the province. The ability of these units to support and conduct small-scale operations, often in connection with Viet Cong local forces, has probably also been reduced somewhat, but they would appear to remain a substantial threat. About 500 US troops have been killed and 2,400 wounded in the PERSHING operation, a rate which will probably equal the casualties suffered by US forces in operations against the 3rd Division during 1966.

20. Pacification in the province, meanwhile, continues to advance at a slow pace and appears subject to quick reversal. About 78 hamlets were targeted for pacification team operations during 1967. A special effort was directed at Phu Cat and Phu My districts where it was hoped that allied military advances had left an opening for a solid pacification operation. By September, 35 of the 42 Revolutionary Development teams in the province, including those in Phu My and Phu Cat, had moved on to their second targeted hamlet of the year--having completed the bulk of their initial pacification procedures. Reports indicate, however, that the enemy is making a special effort to disrupt the program in Phu My and Phu Cat. According to captured enemy documents, the Communists hope to make an all-out attempt there to shake any renewed popular confidence in the government's ability to provide adequate security. The very presence of two enemy regiments operating in and on the edges of the districts will almost certainly tend to undercut the pacification program.

Operations Against the NVA 2nd and 5th Divisions

21. Sustained allied offensives have also seriously cut into the ability of the NVA 2nd Division in the Quang Nam - Quang Tin area, and

-10-

No Foreign Dissem
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of the NVA 5th Division in Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa, to mount concentrated attacks. By reinforcing the units with new replacements, however, the Communists have managed to maintain them as at least a partially viable military threat against the allies. About 35 US, ARVN, and ROK battalions are generally tied down in offensive or defensive operations largely conducted to keep the 2nd and 5th together with local Viet Cong units, off balance. The continuing threat posed by the 2nd Division is reflected in the over 300 US troops killed and 2,000 wounded in operations against it since September of this year.

22. Although there has been great improvement in the flow of allied military and civil traffic in coastal Quang Nam and Quang Tin since the low point of mid-1965, gains in terms of adequate security over the populace have been much more tenuous. There have, in fact, been some recent setbacks. On the night of 2 November, for example, Communist units in Quang Nam attacked a number of allied outposts and a refugee resettlement area in Dai Loc district. The enemy managed to burn some 300 houses in the resettlement area. On 8 November, the Communists returned and launched a diversionary attack against a government district headquarters before again directing their main effort at five nearby refugee camps. Refugee facilities were also hit at the same time in adjacent Hien Duc District. The coordination and intensity of the assaults is indicative of a continuing, strong enemy capability in these areas. The enemy actions almost certainly had a serious psychological impact on the populace and they are hardly likely to put much faith in government pacification efforts until security is improved and such attacks prevented.

23. The situation is somewhat similar in the operating area of the 5th NVA Division. The 5th has been under very heavy pressure from the South Korean 9th Infantry Division and has, for more than a year, absorbed very severe casualties. Nevertheless, it has maintained at least a low level of operations and, with replacements to its two regiments, recently stepped up activities, in the

-11-

No Foreign Dissem

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No Foreign Dissem

populated coastal districts. In combating these forays and other operations by Viet Cong forces in Khanh Hoa and Phu Yen, the ROKs have been overextended and it has been necessary to reinforce them with US units drawn from other areas.

24. The situation took a turn for the worse in August when there were several coordinated attacks on small government outposts in Phu Yen and an element of the NVA 95th Regiment attacked a revolutionary development complex less than six miles south of provincial capital Tuy Hoa. In fierce fighting in the populous Tuy Hoa area before and after the 3 September national elections, 21 hamlets were temporarily overrun--including 12 with pacification teams working in them. Some 2,700 homes were destroyed in the coastal districts of Phu Yen as a result of recent enemy attacks or allied counteraction. US officials estimate that the RD program has been set back at least three months in Phu Yen. This is probably a conservative view, since the psychological impact on the populace of a situation wherein the government moves into establish security and then loses it is extremely deleterious. The people are usually doubly suspicious and uncooperative in any renewed government attempt to assert control and influence.

Personnel Attrition in the NVA Divisions

25. Apart from reported body counts following engagements, there is substantial corollary evidence that the NVA coastal divisions have suffered heavy losses both from combat and personal hardships during the past two years. Documents and interrogation reports, for example, describe extensive casualties and also report extensive incoming replacements. The latter activity is of particular importance since it appears that, despite heavy losses, the three divisions have been able to maintain their over-all personnel strength at around 70 percent of that at which they infiltrated South Vietnam.

-12-

No Foreign Dissem

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26. The estimated total strength of the six regiments when they infiltrated was about 11,500. At the present time, their strength is estimated at approximately 8,500. An exact accounting of all the replacements sent by North Vietnam is impossible to reconstruct. However, reports pinpoint the dispatch to specific regiments of nearly 5,000 replacements, while an additional 3,300 have been reported going to operating areas of the divisions. The exact units to which they were assigned, however, is not clear. This would suggest that the over-all casualties of the three coastal divisions during the last two years have been in the neighborhood of about 50 percent of their total strength. This loss rate was partially confirmed for at least the 2nd Division by a recent knowledgeable defector from that organization.

27. It is possible only to speculate on why the Communists have not continued to add new NVA regiments in the central coastal area in an effort to build up their over-all power. It is probable, however, that the infiltration rate into this region is based mainly on Communist calculations as to what level of forces the region can support and protect. Since the Communists are clearly having considerable difficulty in maintaining the effectiveness of the units already in the central coastal provinces--in view of the allied ability to attack their supply lines and bases--the enemy is unlikely to make any major effort to bolster his unit strength there at the present time. That North Vietnam has the manpower to do so, however, is implied by the deployment of several new NVA regiments to other parts of South Vietnam this year. In each case, however, they have moved into operating areas more favorable from a supply and protection standpoint.

28. There is very substantial evidence that the replacements sent to the central coastal divisions have been far below the quality of the men in the original NVA regiments. Both in training and combat experience, most of the reinforcements are now raw recruits. This has resulted in a substantial lowering of the combat effectiveness of the Communist regimental units below their peak in the latter half of 1965. They are, nonetheless, still formidable units numerically and,

-13-

No Foreign Dissem

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given some respite from allied pressure, would quickly recover the capability for significant and large-scale offensive actions. Meanwhile, they are still capable of conducting small-scale operations and of supporting other Viet Cong units in such actions in and around the populated areas.

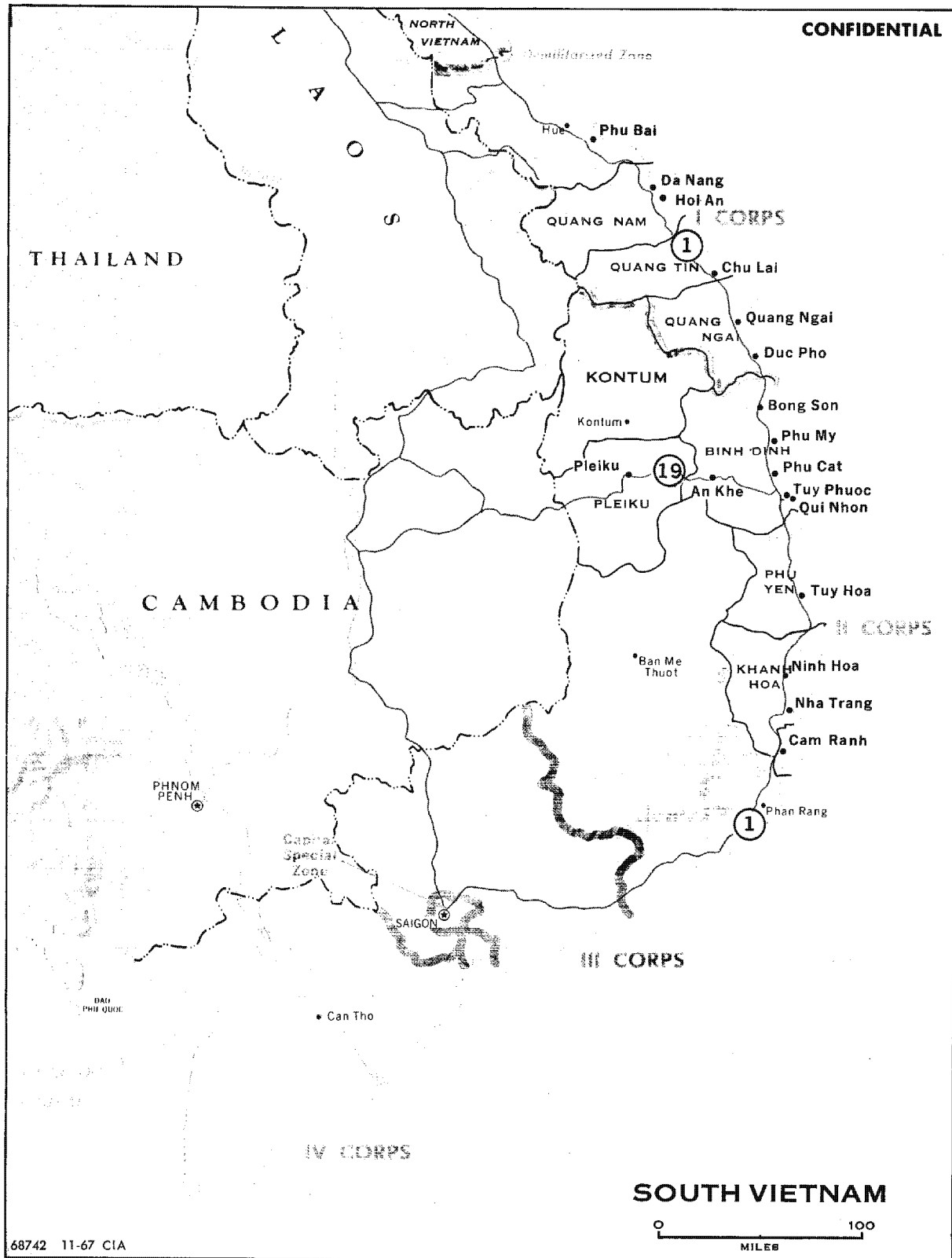
29. As experience this year indicates, substantial and sustained pacification gains in the central coastal provinces are unlikely as long as the Communists possess this capability. There seems little reason to conclude that the enemy will be blocked from such actions as long as he can continue to infiltrate replacements to his units on a level roughly equal to that of the past two years, or until the allies are able to shift enough military forces into the central coastal provinces to firmly crush and destroy the NVA regimental and local main force apparatus in the area.

30. In view of the enemy's present capability to continue offensive operations throughout the country on a scale strong enough to tie up most friendly maneuver battalions now available, it appears unlikely that, in the foreseeable future, the allies will be able to move sufficiently preponderant forces into the coastal provinces to extinguish the Communist regular force threat there. The outlook is rather for continuing, indecisive warfare in the area with pacification gains extremely slow and subject to quick reversal.

-14-

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72-74 DD/S&T		-3	114,115 CA/EUR		-2
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76-81 [REDACTED]	COLLATERAL)	-13	118,119 CA/WH		-2
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22 November 1967

MEMORANDUM TALKING PAPER

The Status of the North Vietnamese Divisions In The
Central Coastal Provinces of South Vietnam

1. This memo was a project initiated by the Indochina Division of OCI to assess the present enemy threat in the heavily populated, strategically important coastal provinces of central South Vietnam. It has been coordinated with SAVA, ONE, and OER.

2. The memo traces the initial infiltration of North Vietnamese forces into the area beginning in late 1964, outlines the heavy losses which these units have suffered and the substantial replacements they have received. In assessing the situation it notes that the momentum which these forces achieved in 1965 has been broken but also points out that these enemy units retain considerable vitality and have been able to sustain a damaging guerrilla type campaign. Consequently, the reassertion of government control and influence among the rural population has been very slow and subject to quick reversal. The outlook is for continuing, indecisive warfare in this strategic region.

3. The memo probably should be given both elite and routine dissemination.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: RECORD

Attached ~~are two~~ ^{is a} copy of revised summary which went into some 21 copies of No. 1398/67 for Mr. Godfrey. No other copies had the revised summary, and no instructions were received to insert them in the copies which had already been disseminated.

ACD.

(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)

For Night Editor

3.5(c)

This memo was given Category E dissem on 27 Nov. but [redacted] held out low-numbered copies because DCI said he might want to dissem it to some elite people.

The DCI wants to send it to the President (and perhaps others) but he did not like the summary. It has been rewritten to overcome his objections.

3.5(c)

Would you please have the summary pages retyped and printed and 10 copies or so (more if [redacted]'s board permits) assembled for OOB. Format, footnote, classification, etc. to be kept as in original. No changes in the body of the memo.

Please put your handiwork on my desk by OOB.
Many thanks.

3.5(c)

28 Nov

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Please inform [] that I invaded his extra copy safe last night and took out 21 copies of The Status of North Vietnamese Divisions in Coastal II Corps (#1398/67) pursuant to [] in-structions (attached). Also attached are extra copies of the summary pages which were printed. 3.5(c)

I took the following copies: 2, 36, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 (Rest [] [])

attached These copies with their new summaries were delivered to O/D/OCI at 00 B. 3.5(c)

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