

## **The Tay Ninh Provincial Reconnaissance Unit and Its Role in the Phoenix Program, 1969–70**

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***Phoenix is still looked upon with a great deal of suspicion and misunderstanding.***  
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The Phoenix program is arguably the most misunderstood and controversial program undertaken by the governments of the United States and South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. It was, quite simply, a set of programs that sought to attack and destroy the political infrastructure of the Lao Dong Party (hereafter referred to as the Viet Cong infrastructure or VCI) in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Phoenix was misunderstood because it was classified, and the information obtained by the press and others was often anecdotal, unsubstantiated, or false. The program was controversial because the antiwar movement and critical scholars in the

United States and elsewhere portrayed it as an unlawful and immoral assassination program targeting civilians.

Unfortunately, there have been few objective analyses of Phoenix, and it still is looked upon with a great deal of suspicion and misunderstanding by many who study the Vietnam War.

Following the below overview is a set of first-hand observations of one part of the Phoenix program in one province of South Vietnam, Tay Ninh. It is a snapshot in time and place, but it represents a picture of the way one important and highly effective aspect of Phoenix worked in the years immediately after the 1968 Tet offensive. It is the story of a single operational unit that was part of the larger, country-wide action element of the Phoenix program—the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs).

### *The Anatomy of Phoenix*

Phoenix was one of several pacification and rural security programs that CIA ran in South Vietnam during the 1960s. The premise of pacification was that if peasants were persuaded that

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an adaptation of a paper Col. Finlayson gave at a CSI/Texas Tech University Joint Conference on Intelligence and the Vietnam War. Introductory material is drawn mainly from the most reliable accounts of the Phoenix program that include: Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001; declassified 2006), chapters 10 and 11; Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1990); and Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997).

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*All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.*

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the government of South Vietnam and the United States were sincerely interested in protecting them from the Viet Cong and trained them to defend themselves, then large areas of the South Vietnamese countryside could be secured or won back from the enemy without direct engagement by the US military.

By 1967, the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), had succeeded in consolidating all military and civilian pacification efforts into one entity, called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

CIA and MACV were intensely involved in CORDS, which was run in conjunction with the Saigon government. CIA-veteran Robert H. Komer initially headed CORDS, but it was most active and successful under William E. Colby, who replaced Komer in 1968.

Colby had served as chief of station in Saigon from 1959 to 1962 and as chief of the Far Eastern Division since then. Colby believed the United States must rid the south of the existing communist parallel government in the villages and eradicate the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in the countryside. Thus CORDS, while working on village defense and civic action programs—the latter included land reform, infrastructure building, and economic development—also devoted considerable resources to rooting out the VCI.

Another component of CORDS was the Phoenix Program.<sup>2</sup> Although Phoenix was run and ostensibly controlled by the Saigon government, CIA funded and administered it. Phoenix built on the work of the CIA-created network of over 100 provincial and district intelligence operation committees in South Vietnam that collected and disseminated information on the VCI to field police and paramilitary units.

Essentially, these committees created lists of known VCI operatives. Once the name, rank, and location of each individual VCI member became known, CIA paramilitary or South Vietnamese police or military forces interrogated these individuals for further intelligence on the communist structure and its operations.

The lists were sent to various Phoenix field forces, which included the Vietnamese national police, US Navy Seal teams and US Army special operations groups, and Provincial Reconnaissance Units such as the one in Tay Ninh.

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<sup>2</sup> In late 1967, the prime minister of South Vietnam decreed that all of his government's anti-VCI activities be integrated into a program he dubbed *Phung Hoang*, after a mythical bird endowed with extraordinary powers. Komer promptly renamed the American advisory effort after the nearest Western equivalent, the phoenix.

These forces went to the villages and hamlets and attempted to identify the named individuals and “neutralize” them. Those on a list were arrested or captured for interrogation, or if they resisted, they were killed. Initially, CIA, with Vietnamese assistance, handled interrogations at the provincial or district levels.

Later, when the program was turned over to the Saigon government, the Agency alone handled information-gathering. Eventually, about 600 Americans were directly involved in the interrogation of VCI suspects, including both CIA and US military personnel.

The PRUs became probably the most controversial element of Phoenix. They were special para-



William Colby pictured on a poster attacking the Phoenix program. CIA History Staff file photo. Date unknown.

military forces that were originally developed in 1964 by the government of South Vietnam and CIA. Initially, they were known as Counter-Terror Teams.

Eventually numbering over 4,000 and operating in all of South Vietnam's 44 provinces, the PRUs were commanded by US military officers and senior NCOs until November 1969, after which they were transitioned to CIA advisers.

Critics of US involvement in Vietnam claimed that the PRUs were nothing more than assassination teams, yet only 14 percent of the VCI killed under Phoenix were killed by PRUs. Most of the rest died in skirmishes and raids involving South Vietnamese soldiers and police and the US military.

In 1972 CORDS reported that since the 1968 Tet Offensive, Phoenix had removed over 5,000 VCI from action, and that conventional military actions and desertions—some prompted by Phoenix—accounted for over 20,000 more. MACV claimed that Phoenix and the US military's response to the Tet Offensive, along with other rural security, and militia programs, had eliminated upwards of 80,000 VCI through defection, detention, or death.

That figure lies on the high end of estimates, all of which were dependent on statistics of varying reliability. By most accounts, however—including those of Vietnamese communists—Phoenix (which ended in 1971) and other pacification programs drove the

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VCI so far underground that it was unable to operate effectively. In the 1972 Easter offensive, and again in 1975, there was no sign of the VCI or the Viet Cong military because Phoenix and its allied activities had dealt them a very serious blow.

#### *July 1969—Initiation to Phoenix*

Of course, I was clueless about all of the above in July 1969, when, as a Marine infantry officer in command of G Company of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines in South Vietnam, I first came in contact with the PRU program. I was then half way through my second tour in the country. We were operating in the "Arizona Territory" west of the An Hoa Combat Base in Northern I Corps, South Vietnam. My company had just returned to Hill 65, a fire support base southwest of Da Nang, when I was informed by the battalion operations officer that my infantry company was to provide security for a special unit of Vietnamese police that was to enter a village in the Arizona Area looking for suspected Viet Cong political cadre.

When the police unit arrived, I greeted its commander, a US military officer dressed in black pajamas and armed with an assortment of unusual weapons, including a Chinese AK-47 assault rifle and a Browning 9-mm automatic pistol. I immediately recognized this officer as a

fellow Marine who had graduated a year ahead of me from the US Naval Academy and who had served with me in 1967 with the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company near Da Nang.

I spent three days with this officer and his team of 16 Vietnamese while they searched a village for VC political cadre. At the end of the operation, he suggested that I extend my tour of duty in Vietnam and apply for a position with the PRU program, to which he was then assigned.

When I asked the normal questions anyone would ask about a new assignment—one he felt was so interesting and challenging that I would gladly extend my tour for a chance to join its ranks—he would say only that the program was classified and I would be told more about it if I agreed to add six months to my scheduled 13-month tour.

I admired this officer and respected his judgment, so I accepted his offer with literally no knowledge of what I was signing up for. He said I should continue to serve as a company commander until III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) headquarters in Da Nang told me I had been invited to travel to Saigon for an interview.

In late August 1969, the invitation came, and I was ordered to Saigon to report to MACV's Marine Liaison Office for instructions. My orders included a provision that I take an Air America

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flight from Da Nang, something few Marines ever did. After landing at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon and reporting to the liaison office, I was told to go to the Duc Hotel, register, and await instructions.

After a few hours, a Vietnamese officer wearing dark sunglasses, a tiger-striped camouflage uniform, and a grim smile met me in the hotel lobby. He introduced himself and told me he would be taking me to his headquarters. I tried to small-talk the officer, but he remained silent or cut me off with a curt, "You will see soon."

After a short ride in his jeep, we arrived at a stately but nondescript villa not far from the Presidential Palace. Inside, I was escorted to an office on the second floor and told to wait. Soon, I was introduced to a man dressed in civilian clothes, who told me he was a captain in the US Army, but he did not tell me his name. He told me he wanted to interview me for "an important job fighting the Viet Cong." If I "passed" the interview, I would be accepted into an organization responsible for eliminating the VCI and assigned to one of its operational units, which could be anywhere in South Vietnam's 44 provinces.

The captain then began a nearly two-hour long interview. For the most part he questioned me about my knowledge of Vietnamese history, culture, and language. He spent a lot of time

trying to ascertain my true feelings for the Vietnamese people and how I thought my military experience as a long-range patrol leader and infantry company commander would benefit the PRU program.

At the end of the interview, he handed me Douglas Pike's, *Viet Cong*. He told me to read it that night and be prepared to discuss it in detail the following morning at 0800.<sup>3</sup> I then was driven back to the Duc Hotel where I immediately began reading. I finished *Viet Cong* at 0200.

Early the next morning, I was picked up at the hotel once more and driven to the PRU headquarters and again ushered up to the second floor office. After a few minutes of waiting alone in the office, the nameless captain and two other Americans in civilian clothes came in. They took me to another office, where I was formally introduced to the two, who turned out to be the top US leadership of the PRU. One was the senior PRU adviser in South Vietnam, a Marine Corps colonel; the other was his deputy, also a Marine Corps officer. The colonel told me I had been chosen to join the PRU program and would be assigned immediately to Tay Ninh Province to replace an officer who had been relieved

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Technique of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

of his duties because of financial and personal misconduct.

The colonel told me forcefully that whatever I might think about working for a classified program like Phoenix, I was to conduct myself with the utmost discretion and do nothing that would violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice. In short, he told me I was never to do anything illegal or immoral while assigned to the PRU, and if I did, he promised to personally see to it that I was cashiered from the Marine Corps and imprisoned. I had no doubt about his orders or his ability to make good his threat.

Surprisingly, we did not talk about Pike's book, which was an eye-opener to me. Until then, my perceptions of the Viet Cong had been shaped by the broad strokes and generalities of the Western press. *Viet Cong* gave me fresh insight into the connections between the VCI and Communist Party of North Vietnam and their organizational and operational procedures. Though reading did not help me through my interview, the knowledge would help me in the months to follow in Tay Ninh.

### *In the Shadow of Nui Ba Den*

The next day, I was on one of Air America's Pilatus Porter planes to Tay Ninh City, the capital of Tay Ninh Province. After a 30-minute flight north from Tan Son Nhut Air Base, I saw the famous Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain) rising out of the flat surrounding plain that constituted

most of the province. After landing and leaving the plane, I found myself alone on the rough corrugated steel runway that was the little Tay Ninh East Air Base. I wondered if anyone had told them I was coming.

I stood in the sweltering heat for a few minutes, becoming the subject of the the curiosity of several Vietnamese irregular soldiers from the US Special Forces Camp B-32, who stared at me from behind their barbed wire encampment. I had begun to think I had been dropped off at the wrong airfield when I spotted a green Toyota Land Cruiser with US Embassy tags approaching me from the far end of the airfield. On reaching me, the driver, a Filipino named Bernie, said he would take me to my new "home," a small villa next to the MACV compound in the city. And so began my 10-month tour of duty with the Tay Ninh PRU.

On arrival I met the US team in Tay Ninh, led by the the provincial officer in charge (POIC)—the senior CIA officer in the province who was, in effect, my day-to-day supervisor. I learned quickly from them that I would be working for two "bosses" in this assignment: in addition to the POIC, I would answer to the province chief who was responsible for all operational activities in Tay Ninh province.

I met the province chief, the next day. A Lt. Colonel in the Vietnamese Army, he spoke good English and proved to be a capable, confident, and well-respected leader. I would come to regard him as a model leader, one who

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*The next day, I found myself alone on the runway of Tay Ninh East Air Base.*

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bore none of the characteristic corrupt qualities that were ascribed to many South Vietnamese provincial figures.

### *Who Were the Tay Ninh PRU?*

On my second day, in a relatively informal gathering, I would meet many of the members of the 92-man Tay Ninh PRU that I would command and advise. I would find them to be brave and experienced troops. Some had military experience with the Cao Dai Army (a local militia that fought the Viet Minh), the South Vietnamese Airborne Division, or the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), which had been commanded by US Special Forces. Most of the PRU's troops were members of the Cao Dai religion, but a few were Roman Catholic, and even two or three ethnic Cambodians were assigned. All of them had a deep hatred for the Viet Cong, primarily because of atrocities committed against them and their families. Religion and family played large parts in their lives.

The Tay Ninh PRU was divided into five 18-man teams (each team was broken further into three squads), one for each of the four districts in Tay Ninh Province and one for Tay Ninh City. The headquarters of the Tay Ninh PRU, which was collocated with the Tay Ninh City team, consisted of just two individuals, the commander and his operations officer. The commander of

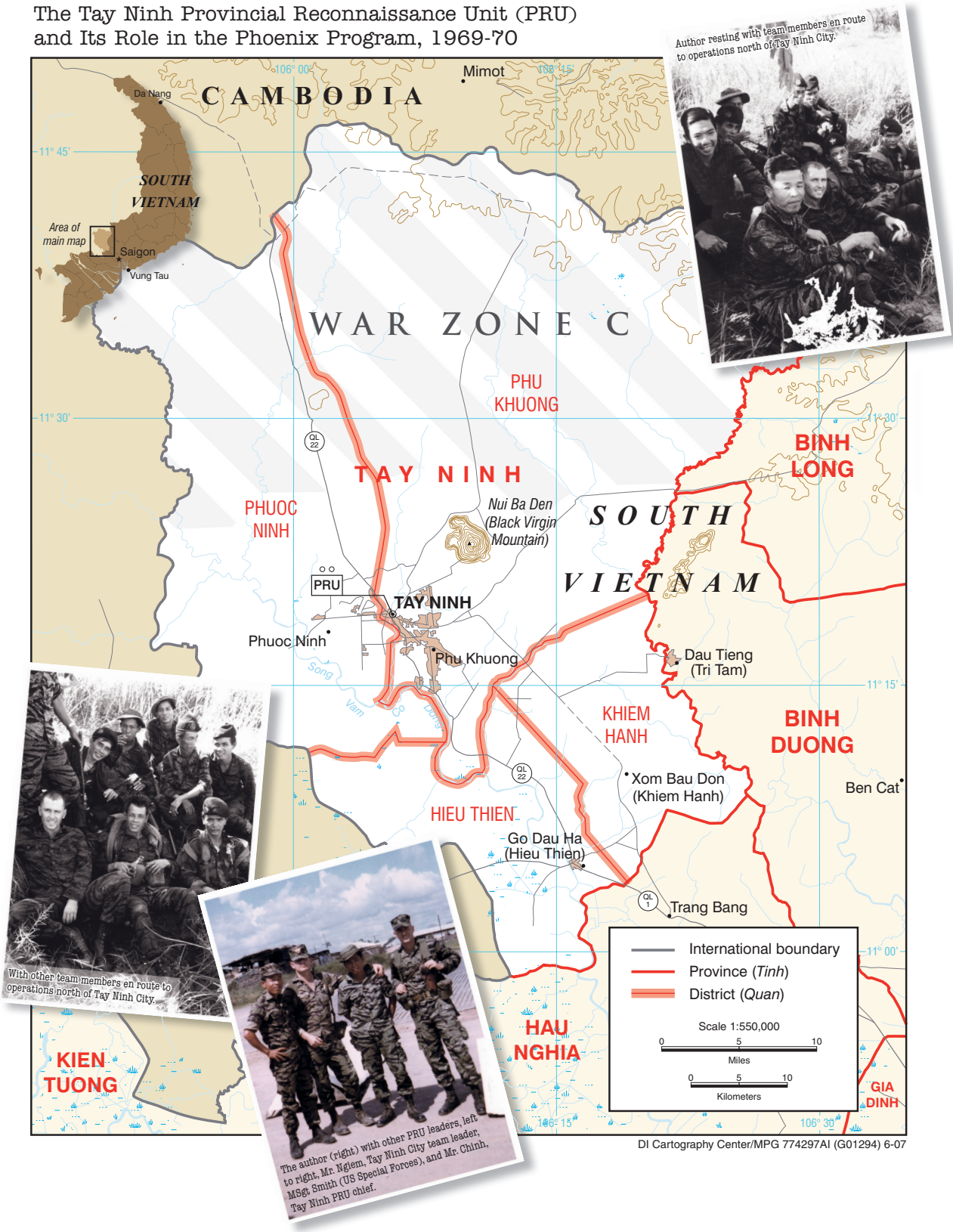
the city team also served as the Tay Ninh PRU's deputy commander.

The PRU was armed with M16 rifles, M60 machine guns, 45-caliber automatic pistols, and M79 grenade launchers; however, individuals also had a variety of other weapons they had acquired from disparate sources. The units also possessed PRC-25 radios, 7-by-50 binoculars, medical kits, 4-by-4 Toyota  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton trucks, and Honda motorcycles. In garrison at their district headquarters, the men wore civilian clothes; in the field they wore tiger-stripe camouflage uniforms or black pajamas. The units' US advisers were similarly outfitted and armed.

In my first assessment of the Tay Ninh PRU's operational capabilities, I found that the teams functioned well in most situations, but they lacked fire discipline. That is, the teams did not maneuver well under fire, and they were not proficient in calling for and adjusting supporting arms, generally artillery fire. Thus, the units did not perform well when they and the enemy met by chance or when the enemy was prepared for them.

In part, this was a product of their training, which was unsystematic and erratic. Most PRU members were highly experienced combat veterans, who had survived many years in elite combat units before coming to the PRU, but a few had received only rudimentary field training or had

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served in noncombat units. At the national level, training took place from time to time at a camp near Vung Tau on the shore of the South China Sea; but at the local level, US commanders and advisers led training when operational lulls permitted. As a result, training was uneven and so was performance.

The PRU's strong suits lay in its intimate and complete knowledge of the people and terrain of Tay Ninh Province. This knowledge was central to their success in mounting operations against local VCI cadre and in compensating for training shortcomings. This knowledge of the province led to a great ability to develop accurate intelligence on the VCI and to plan methodically. The members of the PRU also were masters in camouflage, concealment, and night movement. As a result they tended to rely heavily on surprise and ambush to achieve decisive results.

### *Sources of Intelligence*

Thanks to the introduction of systems associated with CORDS, the Tay Ninh PRU *in theory* had a wide array of intelligence sources available to it. Everything from local agent reports to national-level intelligence could *in theory* be funneled to them via the system of District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers (DIOCCs). US military district advisers could channel operational leads to district PRU units for exploitation. At the provincial level, the same organizational structure existed for coordination; however, at that

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level, the US PRU adviser filled the role US military advisers played at the district level.

In practice, however, few operational leads were shared with the PRU for a host of reasons. Petty jealousies between the Vietnamese National Police, the Vietnamese Special Branch Police, and district chiefs often prevented the transmission of good operational leads to the PRU.

This same problem existed on the American side, where US military commanders and civilian advisers were reluctant to share intelligence with the Vietnamese for fear of compromise. Sadly, US civilian advisers were reluctant to share intelligence with the PRU even when they were specifically directed to do so by the US Embassy in Saigon—and many of them even refused to share their intelligence with other US agencies for fear of others getting a share of the credit.

In theory, the DIOCC system should have worked well in developing operational leads, and on occasion it did. By and large, however, it did not function properly in Tay Ninh Province because of personal intransigence and bureaucratic in-fighting.

The sources that were uniformly inaccurate were the agent reports developed by US military intelligence units. During the 10 months that I served as the PRU adviser, not a single agent report received by the PRU from the US

military proved to be of value. Most agents were paid for their information in a piecemeal fashion, and this led to the manufacture of a large volume of worthless reports.

Vietnamese National Police agent reports were equally worthless to the Tay Ninh PRU, and in some cases, dangerously inaccurate. National-level intelligence sources were accurate but often did not pertain to VCI activities, so they were of little value to the PRU in rooting out the VCI in the province.

Of moderate importance and value to the PRU were reports from the interrogation of prisoners by the Vietnamese Police Special Branch at the Provincial Interrogation Center (PIC). Many of the prisoners held at the PIC provided accurate and timely information on VCI personalities and activities. When this information was shared with the PRU, which was rare, the results were usually highly successful.

Of particular value were the many VC who rallied to the South Vietnamese government as part of the *Chieu Hoi* ("Open Arms") Program. These *Hoi Chanh*s (returnees) were screened after they surrendered to the South Vietnamese government and then interrogated at the PIC, where they often volunteered to guide PRU teams into highly contested areas to capture VCI. *Hoi Chanh*s were usually far more reliable than other prisoners, although many VC

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*The intimate knowledge of the VCI led to many highly accurate operational leads.*

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guerrillas and North Vietnam Army (NVA) soldiers also provided useful information on VCI targets.

Another source of intelligence that was often productive, but time consuming to exploit and difficult to process, was the vast store of data collected by Census Grievance teams during 1963–64. These teams conducted interviews in conjunction with a national census at that time. Their interviews led to the development of maps of the province's districts and villages that were color-coded to illustrate degrees of loyalty to the South Vietnamese government. Green-colored houses were deemed loyal; yellow meant neutral; and red indicated VC sympathy.

In addition, these maps would often contain the names of family members who were VCI members or sympathetic to the communists. This storehouse of data was kept at the CIA villa in Tay Ninh City and reviewed periodically by the US adviser for operational leads. In most cases, the information was dated or difficult to exploit because of the inaccessibility or the death or capture of the communist sympathizer, but in some notable cases important mid-level VCI cadre were arrested or killed as a result of information on the Census Grievance maps. Had these maps been digitized and the information contained in a readily accessible database, the time taken to absorb their information probably would have been

greatly reduced and many more operational leads developed.

By far, the most prolific source of intelligence for the PRU was the PRU's own intelligence system. The Tay Ninh PRU was forced to develop its own source of operational leads because of the aforementioned reluctance of other agencies to share information on VCI targets. As natives of Tay Ninh Province the PRU members had lived and worked in the province for most, if not all, of their lives. They were part of the fabric of the provincial society, and their families engaged in all kinds of commerce throughout the province.

Through family contacts, PRU members developed an extensive intelligence system that successfully gathered accurate information on the VCI at the hamlet and village level to map VCI activities. In many cases, the PRU members knew personally the VCI cadre they were hunting; indeed, many had known them since childhood. They knew the families of the VCI and the details of their personal lives. In some cases, the Tay Ninh PRU was actually successful in infiltrating the VCI.

This intimate knowledge of the VCI led to many highly accurate operational leads and the elimination of several important VCI cadres during my tour there. While I was the US adviser to the Tay Ninh PRU, approximately two-thirds of the VCI the PRU captured or killed were uncov-

ered by the intelligence developed by the PRU's organic system.

### *Operational Relationships*

While the PRU program was a national organization under CORDS on the American side and the Ministry of Interior on the Vietnamese side, it was much more a provincial "action arm." By that I mean the operational direction and authority for any PRU came from the Vietnamese province chief, who was the only official who could sign an arrest order or operational order for the PRU.

Thus, as the US PRU adviser in Tay Ninh, I could coordinate with Vietnamese and American military units and plan operations, but I could not authorize them. To conduct any operation by the Tay Ninh PRU against a VCI target, I had to submit a written request for a signed authorization from the province chief.

Since the province chief and his key subordinates and US advisers met almost daily, this requirement never really was an impediment to successful use of the PRU. Down the line, at the district level, Vietnamese district chiefs could not use the PRU teams located there on missions without the approval of both the US PRU adviser and the province chief. Even so, because the district coordination centers, the DIOCCs, were set up to rapidly process such operational requests, I saw no meaningful delays in approving PRU opera-



tions at the district level while I was there.

### *The Impact of the Changing Role of American Participation*

I arrived at a time of shifting arrangements. Installed as a “commander” of the PRU in September, I became an “advisor” after November 1969. Until then, “command” rested with the US military officers and senior noncommissioned officers assigned to the PRUs. This arrangement changed after November because General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, had become concerned about perceived abuses in the Phoenix program and the effect allegations of abuse were having on support of the war in the United States.

That month, he issued an order that changed the status of US military men assigned to the PRU from “commander” to “adviser.” He also stipulated that no American was to accompany PRU teams on operations in the field. This he did to avoid the possibility that US personnel might involve themselves in actions that could be construed as violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

I was not privy to the rationale of Abrams or his staff in formulating these restrictions, but I can say that during my assignment in Tay Ninh, I never witnessed and never even heard of a single operational act by either an American or a Vietnamese

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*MACV’s policy [of keeping US commanders out of the field] devastated the PRU’s morale and effectiveness.*

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PRU member that violated the code.

The new policy devastated the morale and effectiveness of the men in Tay Ninh. The PRU relied heavily on the Americans who accompanied them on dangerous missions to provide radio contact with US supporting units, especially medevac helicopters and artillery units. Without the prospect of Americans by them, PRU members became reluctant to carry out missions into contested areas north and west of Tay Ninh City, such as War Zone C and the An Thanh-Cay Me border area with Cambodia. They knew if they got into difficulty, without Americans they would be unable to receive prompt medical evacuation, supporting arms fire, or emergency extraction by US helicopters.

This was no small matter for the Tay Ninh PRU. Its teams operated in areas in which the North Vietnamese Army’s 5th, 7th, and 9th Divisions operated. And, as lightly armed units, the PRU teams needed rapid US fire support if they engaged with NVA or VC main force units.

After November 1969, it took several months and many hours of training before the Tay Ninh PRU members were again will-

ing to venture into contested areas. I admit that in some cases, my loyalty to the PRU and my understanding of leadership caused me to question MACV’s restrictions. I formally requested reconsideration of the policy but the request was denied.

### *Why Were PRU Teams Successful in Destroying the VCI?*

While my experience in Tay Ninh does not necessarily represent the experience of other PRU advisers and their units, I can say confidently that the Tay Ninh PRU was successful during my tour. From September 1969 to June 1970, the Tay Ninh PRU



Formal military formations were rare in Tay Ninh. In this case, four members of the PRU were awarded Bronze Stars for bravery during an operation with the US Army’s 25th Infantry Division. Photo courtesy of the author.

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*The Tay Ninh PRU was successful because it was a locally recruited outfit.*

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killed 31 VCI and captured 64—at a cost of only two PRU members killed and two wounded.

As early as December 1968, it was apparent to the Tay Ninh PRU that most of the senior VCI cadre had been either killed or captured in the months after Tet or had been driven into neighboring Cambodia. As a credible political threat, the VC had ceased to function in any meaningful way by the time I left Vietnam in June 1970.<sup>4</sup>

Further proof of the PRU's effectiveness came in 1975, when the communists finally defeated the South Vietnamese. The NVA commander occupying Tay Ninh Province would put in a hurried request to North Vietnam for 200 civilian political cadre. He reported that there were only six local VC cadre left in the province to manage the province's affairs.

The Tay Ninh PRU was successful primarily because it was a locally recruited outfit whose members had an intimate knowledge of their province, its people, and the enemy. They also had discipline, strong leadership, and an intense personal motivation to defeat the VC. They had an accurate and highly effective intelligence system that was difficult for the enemy to infiltrate or

defeat because it was based on strong family loyalties and religious and civic affiliations.

The American commanders and advisers came and went and played important roles. But few served more than a year in any province. And as much as I (or I think any of my fellow PRU advisers) would like to find ways to take credit for the success of the PRU, I (and we) cannot. Long after the Americans left South Vietnam, the Tay Ninh PRU continued to root out the VCI. The concept may have been an American one, but the execution and adaptation were entirely Vietnamese.

After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the lives of Tay Ninh PRU members changed dramatically for the worse. They were hunted down and arrested or killed. Many served long terms in reeducation camps, where they were tortured and made to work under inhumane conditions. Some escaped the camps and made their way to the United States, where they were settled by the US government and given jobs.

Most, however, were executed or died in squalid camps. A few never surrendered and continued to fight the Vietnamese communists and their southern allies. They organized a "stay behind" unit in Tay Ninh called the "Yellow Dragons," and their activities were still reported on by the communist authorities in the province well into the 1990s.

### *Lessons Learned*

With the Tay Ninh experience behind me, I have often pondered if units similarly organized, equipped, and trained could duplicate the PRU's success in other places and times. Could special police units drawn from local communities to identify and apprehend insurgents be successful and be so in keeping with the fundamental democratic principles we espouse? I believe they can *if* the following conditions are met:

- The units are imbued with both a professional and civic ethical standards that make them accountable to the people for their actions, not only to specific government officials or political leaders.
- They are equipped and trained to a high level of professionalism.
- They are paid well (and regularly) and rewarded for tangible results—a crucial element in preventing corruption and enemy infiltration.
- They are organized into small, tightly knit teams whose ranks are filled by members of the communities they serve. (Out of a population of over 17 million, there were never more than 4,500 PRU members in all of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Most of these PRU members were natives of the provinces in which they served.)
- They are subject to effective judicial and political oversight

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<sup>4</sup> I obtained the information about the status of the VCI in Tay Ninh Province after I left Vietnam from an interview with two former Tay Ninh PRU members who resettled in the United States in 1985.

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*Special police units drawn from local communities to identify and apprehend insurgents can be successful and still be in keeping with the fundamental democratic principles we espouse.*

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and not free to conduct unauthorized missions, without orders from a competent legal authority.

- The units are not responsible for interrogating or incarcerating captives beyond seeking identifying information and holding them until transfer elsewhere.
- A clear separation is made between PRU-type units and other police units, especially those involved in criminal investigations and arrests.
- The units' members and their families are protected by the state from retribution and given assurances that their

names will not be revealed to the press or any other unauthorized source.

- They are provided with the highest level of professional and ethical leadership
- They receive full access to pertinent targeting intelligence through some form of inter-agency coordinating group, like the South Vietnamese DIOCCs.
- If US advisors are assigned to such a unit, they should receive pre-assignment training concentrating on language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, intelligence management, small unit tactics, and staff planning.

