

Battle of Ap Bac

The ARVN and The Battle of Ap Bac

With the Geneva Accords of 1954, the French agreed that Vietnam should be split into two halves at the 17th Parallel as a temporary measure until elections could be held in 1956 to decide whether the Nationalist-Communists (of North Vietnam) or the Nationalist-Capitalists (of South Vietnam) should rule the reunited country. The elections never took place, and the Republic of (South) Vietnam under the corrupt leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem established itself under US patronage.

There had technically been a “Republic of Vietnam” and a “Vietnamese National Army” since 1949. This was, however, a French attempt to justify their war in Indochina to an international audience. The Vietnamese National Army eventually numbered around 170,000 men (including air and naval forces). In addition, there were regional Civil Guard battalions (which were full-time, but generally less well equipped and trained than the regulars) and part-time “local self-defence” militias in the villages. On 1st January 1954, the regular troops consisted of 45 infantry battalions, 4 parachute battalions, 1 reconnaissance regiment (3 armoured car squadrons), 4 mortar companies, 54 light infantry battalions and 14 heavy weapons companies. The officers were predominantly pro-French, and lacked staff experience in most cases.

There were many factions (including the senior officers of the Army) who did not support Diem as leader. However, by a mixture of force and political manoeuvre (supported by the US) he prevailed and the Army was reorganised as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

With the changeover to direct US support (under French control the Vietnamese Army had been paid for by the USA, but via France), the new ARVN was expected to fight a Korean style conventional war against invading North Vietnamese regular soldiers. They were built up and trained for this style of warfare, which made their units too heavy and cumbersome for the counter-insurgency warfare they were forced to undertake as resistance to the increasingly autocratic Diem built during the late 1950s.

By 1958 the ARVN consisted of four field divisions (8,500 men each), six light divisions (5,000 men each), 13 territorial regiments (whose strength varied), and a parachute regiment. By 1956 there were enough U.S. Army advisors for assignment to each ARVN regiment. American officers were likewise reorganizing and helping train the small Vietnamese Navy (2,160 officers and men) and Air Force (4,000 officers and men). The Vietnamese Marine Corps was a two-battalion amphibious force within the nation's naval establishment.

Backing these developing regular forces, at least on paper, were two generally feeble paramilitary organizations - the Civil Guard (CG) and the Village Self Defence Corps (SDC). The larger of these, the Civil Guard, existed within the Ministry of Interior and was funded and advised by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM). Its 48,000

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men, therefore, were not counted against the (Washington set) 150,000-man force level ceiling that regulated the size of Diem's regular forces. Nor were the 47,000 members of the Self Defence Corps, even though this organization received limited amounts of U.S. military assistance funds. In any case, serious shortcomings were evident in both the CG and the SDC. Organized into provincial companies directly responsible to the various province chiefs, the Civil Guard was entirely separate from the ARVN chain of command. Furthermore, American civilians under government contract had armed and trained the CG for police-type as opposed to military missions. The SDC, essentially a scattering of local militia units, was even weaker, having been organised at the village level into squads and an occasional platoon. Although the SDC units were subordinate to the respective village chief, the ARVN bore the responsibility for providing them with arms and training. More often than not the ARVN units gave their obsolete weapons to the SDC and showed little genuine interest in training them.

In early 1959, the entire ARVN was in the final phase of a reorganisation programme which would culminate by mid-year in the formation of seven divisions of uniform size (10,500 men each), five territorial regiments, and an airborne brigade (formed from the old Army parachute regiment). Under the new organisation the seven standard divisions were to be deployed in or near population centres throughout the country and were to be organized under two corps headquarters, one (I Corps) located at Da Nang, and the other (II Corps) located at Pleiku in the Central Highlands. A third provisional corps headquarters had also been formed in Saigon for activation in the event of a national emergency. By 1961 the third corps headquarters would be activated and geographic boundaries of all three corps would be delineated to facilitate the coordination of the government's military efforts against the Viet Cong. A fourth Corps was formed in the Mekong Delta in late 1962.

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As the ARVN struggled to contain the Nationalist and Communist rebels in South Vietnam during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the USA gradually stepped up military aid. Initially this was by providing equipment and training, with some specialist US units providing intelligence resources. Three main areas altered the pace and scope of war in Vietnam from that of the French Indochina War (1946-54); improved radio tracking and surveillance, the use of helicopters in combat operations, and the introduction of the M113 APC.

The Viet Cong used WW2 era radios (mainly captured from French forces in the earlier conflict), which were easily traced and intercepted by US specialists. The VC were quite tight on using codes rather than open language, but at least the position of their radios could be traced and followed. Good intelligence pictures of which VC units were using which radios (and their base areas) started to be formed, which gave a chance to locate their main units and crush them.

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In the French War, Viet Minh bases in inaccessible areas gave good security as, apart from dropping paratroopers into the area, other units had long marches with many chances of ambush before entering the VM stronghold. This gave the VM ample opportunity to either flee or prepare intricate ambush systems to defeat the attackers. With the introduction of US helicopters to the war, ARVN units could be transferred in minutes to positions that were several days journey from their bases. This massively improved both mobility and surprise for the ARVN.

The building of two mechanised companies with 15 M113 APCs each in April 1962 gave a similar increase in firepower and assault capability to the ARVN. These two units were deployed in the Mekong Delta region (which was the most active at that point) and proved themselves able to put VC units (who apparently had no anti-armour weapons) to flight.

Operation in the Delta during 1962 had shown that with their American advisors and equipment, the ARVN could defeat the VC guerrillas. Several actions had resulted in VC routs – and heavy losses from fighter-bombers dropping bombs and napalm on the fleeing guerrillas. There had been some disturbing (for the US advisors) tendencies for the ARVN commanders to not press combat with the VC and to leave the work to artillery and air units. However there was still confidence that if the VC would stand up and fight the ARVN in a conventional manner then the technological superiority of their equipment would destroy the guerrillas and give extra confidence to ARVN troops and commanders.

The ideal opportunity seemed to present itself at the end of December 1962, when surveillance showed the presence of a main force VC unit in the hamlet of Tan Thoi fourteen miles northwest of My Tho (and about forty miles southwest of Saigon). Radio intercepts seem to indicate that the VC was using Tan Thoi as some form of headquarters centre, and that a reinforced company of main force VC defended the position (i.e. about 120 men). An attack by the local ARVN formation, the 7th Division, was planned for the 2nd January 1963 by the US advisory team. Units of the 7th Division (which had the best record for action against the VC at that point) would be supported by Civil Guard battalions, together with the 4th Mechanized Rifle Squadron of the 2nd Armoured Cavalry Regiment in M113 APCs, and helicopters (both transports and the new gunships). The plan involved converging assaults on the hamlet by the 2nd Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment of the 7th Division landed to the north by helicopter, two Civil Guard battalions marching up from the south, while the M113s moved up along the western perimeter of the battle zone waiting to advance and trap the retreating VC. Two companies of the 1st Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment were held at Tan Hiep airbase as a reserve (to be moved into battle by helicopter). Batteries of 105mm howitzers and 4.2” mortars were positioned to the south to provide support fire. (The ensuing battle has become known as the Battle of Ap Bac, due to the name of the hamlet around which most of the fighting occurred. However, “Ap” is Vietnamese for “hamlet” – therefore “Ap Bac” is “Bac hamlet”).

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At that point, the USA had deployed a few helicopter transport companies to Vietnam, mainly equipped with the Vertol CH-21 Shawnee (“Flying Banana”). Due to increasing amounts of VC fire against helicopters, the first armed UH-1A Hueys had been deployed as an experimental unit to Vietnam in October 1962. In November, a further eleven UH-1B versions were added (these had a more powerful engine, and the weapons package now included M-60 LMGs in hydraulically operated turrets rather than fixed to the skids as on the UH-1A – both carried seven or eight 70mm rockets attached to each of the skids). There was a major ARVN airborne operation planned in another sector on the same day, and only 10 CH-21 transports were available to 7th Division. This meant that the helicopter landed battalion would have to be landed in companies rather than en masse.

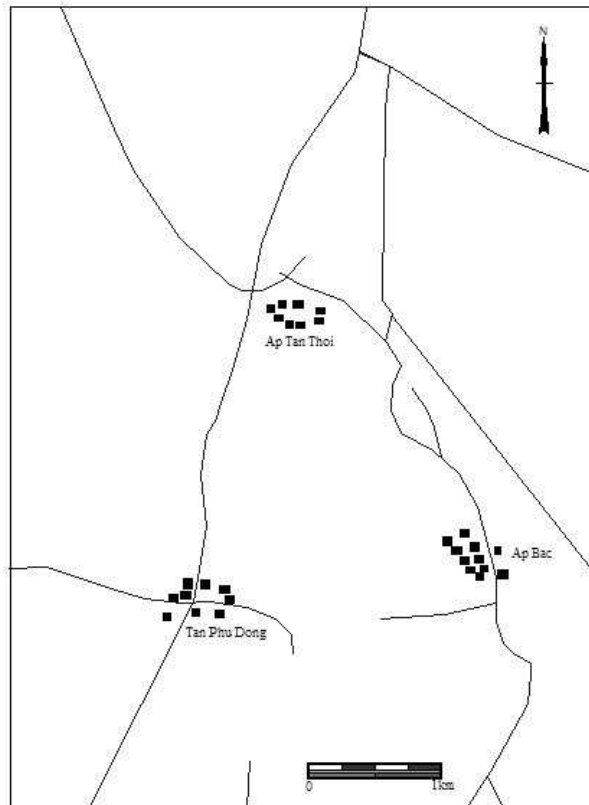
That morning a heavy fog lay across most of the Delta area, and was particularly heavy around Tan Hiep airbase. The helicopters managed to land the first company successfully at about 07:00, but then the fog closed in and the second and third companies could not be landed until after 09:30. This meant that the first company stayed on the LZ rather than advancing, and therefore the first units to advance into the battle area were the two Civil Guard battalions marching from the south (which had set off around 04:00).

The area of the battle, as typical in rural Vietnam, was crossed by irrigation canals (see map – all of the lines on the map are canals). While of no great size, they presented a serious obstacle to the M113 as the sides were too steep to allow the vehicles to climb out. As the crews then had to construct a rough bridge of brushwood, then get at least one APC across before winching the rest over – for the whole company to cross one of these could take an hour or more. In addition, the edges of the canals were heavily overgrown, and during the French Indochina War the guerrillas had developed tactics of digging foxholes into the banks of these canals. Each of the two Civil Guard battalions formed a Task Force. Task Force A was to advance on Tan Thoi along the canal via Bac, while Task Force B similarly moved up via Tan Phu Dong.

The captain in charge of “A” was suspicious of the tree-lined canal just south of Ap Bac, and so at around 07:45 he halted the battalion about 150m away behind a low paddy dike, and sent part of one company forward to reconnoitre the position. At around 30m from the tree line, a VC mainforce platoon dug in along the bank open fire. The Civil Guards started to flee back to the dike behind, but were then also hit by fire into their right flank (from a unit of regional guerrillas hidden in a coconut grove). The CG company commander and his executive officer were killed in seconds, and instead of providing covering fire the rest of the battalion took cover behind the dike. Some raised their rifles above the dike and fired blindly ahead – causing more casualties to their beleaguered comrades fleeing from the VC.

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Ap Bac Battlefield

The battalion commander then attempted various half-hearted flanking manoeuvres for the next two hours, until he was lightly wounded himself and the efforts petered out. During these two hours, the battalion called in repeated artillery strikes but these all landed behind the VC positions. At around 10:00, the battalion commander radioed his superior (Major Lam Quang Tho, the province chief, who had his HQ less than 3km to the south) requesting support. He reported eight dead and fourteen wounded (including himself). Rather than order Task Force B to support their comrades, or moving up and taking charge himself, or attempting to sort out the artillery problems (which had been reported to him by one of the American advisors), Tho called the 7th Division commander (Colonel Bui Dinh Dam) and demanded that the two reserve companies be landed behind the canal to cut off the VC. Dam agreed and at 10:20 the 1st Company/11th Regiment were landed just west of Bac. Unfortunately, the VC also had units dug in along the tree line surrounding the hamlet, plus further units on the canal running towards Tan Thoi. The senior US advisor to the 7th Division (Lt. Col. John Vann) guessed that there may be troops in Bac, and from his L-19 spotter plane advised the incoming helicopters (ten CH-21s transporting the ARVN, plus five escorting UH-1 gunships) to land out of .30 cal range from the tree line. However, due to previous disagreements between Vann and the helicopter units, they ignored him and landed within 200m of the western tree line of Bac.

The VC immediately began pouring fire into the helicopters as they came in to land, using LMGs, BARs and rifles. The gunships immediately returned fire with rockets

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and machine guns, and were amazed that the VC continued to return fire and did not flee as had previously happened with helicopter attacks. The CH-21s had dropped their ARVN troops (who dived into the mud of the paddy fields and generally refused to fire), and then attempted to take off. All of the helicopters had received multiple hits, but only one was unable to lift. The pilot reported that he was shutting his engine and that he, his co-pilot and two crewmen would take cover with the ARVN.

The helicopter crews had a “code” which said that downed crew should be rescued straight away, and that leaving them to make the best of it with the ARVN was not enough. Therefore one of the other CH-21s landed between the downed helicopter and Ap Bac to lift them out – and therefore landed in the worst of the VC fire. This second helicopter was quickly shot out of action, and two crews were now in the paddy fields. The command pilot of the gunship platoon announced that he was going in for them – and attempted to land behind the two wrecks with covering fire from his four other helicopters. As he slowed down to a hover, the UH-1 was racked by VC machinegun fire and the rotor blade was shattered. The gunship crashed into the paddy about 50m behind the others. A third CH-21 had meanwhile crash-landed a short distance away from the battlefield due to damage. This meant that in five minutes the VC had shot down four helicopters. They tried to add insult to injury by burning the downed helicopters in the paddy with rifle grenades and then 60mm mortar shells – but they were out of range of the grenades, and the mortar shells missed.

The artillery observer with the ARVN company in the paddy field was calling in support fire, but refused to put his head above the low bank he was taking cover behind. Therefore the rounds landed anywhere but on the VC positions. Bullets then hit the radio operator and then the radio itself, and all attempts to call in fire ceased. After about half an hour, two VNAF Skyraiders appeared and dropped napalm (on the huts of Ap Bac, rather than the actual VC positions around the hamlet), then made further passes to drop conventional bombs and also to strafe. The ARVN assumed that the VC would be killed or at least suppressed by this, and many got up for a better look – then came under renewed fire from the VC. The ARVN resumed their prone positions behind the low paddy field walls.

Vann meanwhile was berating the advisors to the M113 squadron, which appeared to be sat doing nothing to the west of the canal between Tan Phu Dong and Ap Tan Thoi. The commander of the unit, Captain Ly Tong Ba, had served with the French forces as an officer in an armoured car regiment, and attended armour courses in both France and the USA. He had previously proven himself an aggressive commander with his mechanised squadron, and was held by the American advisors to be that rarest of creatures – a fighting ARVN officer. Therefore it was a surprise to Vann and the advisory team with the squadron that Ba was sat on the other side of the canal and not making any effort to advance and support his pinned infantry comrades. He repeatedly refused to move, and even after an order was issued by Colonel Dam to advance, he reported that crossing the canal was too difficult and that the infantry should be sent instead.

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The infantry that Ba was talking about were the 3rd Company of the 2nd Battalion/11th Regiment, who had landed north of his position just over an hour before and were advancing on Tan Thoi (as were the 2nd Company who had been dropped to the east of the hamlet). However, Vann knew that if he ordered these units to march to the relief of the ARVN company and the helicopter crews near Bac, they would soon realise the strength of the opposition there and halt somewhere en route. Better to leave them advancing on Tan Thoi (which was, after all, the real objective) and get Ba to move his M113s towards Bac.

For about half an hour the US advisors and an increasingly indignant Ba engaged in arguments about what could and could not be done. Eventually Ba agreed to let one of the US advisors use one of the M113s to look for a better crossing site over the canal.

The Civil Guards of Task Force A were now halted in the paddy fields, but were neither under fire nor firing at the VC. The US advisors tried to push their commander to try and outflank the VC in the canal bank ahead of them, but he reported that he was under orders (from Major Tho) to maintain his “blocking position”. Task Force B was still slowly advancing through the region of Tan Phu Dong.

At 11:10, Vann flew back over Ba’s position and noted that the APCs still had not moved. He then contacted the US advisor (over a radio that Ba could hear) and told him to shoot Ba and take command of the squadron! The advisor and Ba then decided to lead the M113s south to where a better crossing point was expected.

After discussion with the helicopter pilots back at Tan Hiep, Vann decided to try another rescue mission for the downed crew (some of whom were reported as seriously wounded). He had assumed that all of the VC fire at the helicopters and the ARVN company (who were now down to about half of their initial strength of 102 men) had been from the southern branch of the canal below Bac. Therefore he organised for the gunships (of which one had been damaged and taken out of service) to strafe this area and suppress it while one of the CH-21s landed west of the wrecks to recover the wounded. This went ahead – and the CH-21 was quickly shot up. The VC tally was now five helicopters shot down (plus another out of service).

Meanwhile the 2nd Battalion/11th Regiment had reached Tan Thoi – and walked straight into the fire of a reinforced VC mainforce company, plus platoons of regional guerrillas. The three ARVN companies quickly assumed defensive positions around the hamlet. Now only the M113 squadron was making any sort of aggressive movement.

With the battle stalled around the two hamlets, repeated VNAF fighter-bomber strikes with napalm, bombs and machinegun fire were called in. Unfortunately, the pilots continued to hit the (unoccupied) huts and animal shelters rather than the surrounding tree lines. Artillery strikes were similarly ineffective.

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At 13:45, the first three M113s were across the canal and could advance towards Bac. While Captain Ba was using his vehicle to winch across the remainder, the other two went ahead to rescue the helicopter crew and ARVN infantrymen. The VC fired a few 60mm mortar shells at them, but they arrived at the crash site without real incident. There was no VC fire from the tree line, and the wounded aircrew were quickly moved into one of the M113s. As this was being done, the VC started firing again. The two .50 cal from the M113s returned fire, but two problems prevented this from having much effect: the gunners could not see the VC, and the heavy machinegun was difficult for the small Vietnamese soldiers to handle. The fire was cutting swathes through the vegetation, but the VC were actually positioned beneath. The VC fire killed one of the M113 drivers (who were operating with their heads out of the vehicle).

Two more APCs had crossed the canal, and Ba sent them to assault the canal around Bac, where the VC .30 cal MGs were apparently situated. As they approached, the infantrymen disembarked and (as they had been taught by their American trainers) advanced firing their rifles and BARs in support of the .50 cal. However, unlike previous actions where the VC had been panicked by the M113s and started fleeing as they approached – this time they held their positions and returned fire. Casualties quickly mounted among the ARVN mechanised infantry, and the .50 cal gunners both ducked down into the vehicles and thereby began firing into the sky. The two APCs and their infantry were obviously rattled by their experience, and started to pull back.

Ba had now got more of the APCs across, and (leaving one to continue the winching operation) set off himself with both his vehicle and one other. He moved up to confer with the M113 crews and their US advisor by the helicopter wrecks, but in a fluke incident he banged his head and was knocked unconscious as his vehicle jolted. The M113 squadron was now effectively leaderless, as none of the remaining NCOs would take charge. The remaining M113s moved up and assaulted the canal positions individually, and were all driven back. The heaviest losses were among the gunners, who were also the commanders of each vehicle. The squadron's morale was rapidly ebbing.

The last M113 to arrive at the fire fight was a specialist one; this was the first use of the modified flamethrower version, and both advisors and ARVN fully expected this to finally clear the VC. But as it moved up to attack, the flamethrower sputtered and failed to ignite correctly (due to a faulty mix of the petrol jelly). So much for US technology!

After twenty minutes, a dazed Ba was back in command. He went back to his training and launched another assault with the carriers and their riflemen in support. Despite the fact that the M113 crews were now becoming very jittery (the drivers were now using the periscope-style vision system from inside the vehicles, which made them move slower and with less ability to keep track of other vehicle positions, and the .50 cal gunners were almost all replacements), most of the carriers gradually trundled

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forwards. The dug-in VC, without any anti-tank weaponry, should soon break and run!

But, in an act of desperate heroism, Squad Leader Dung leapt out of his foxhole in front of one of the lumbering M113s. Pulling a grenade from his belt, he drew the pin and threw it on top of the vehicle. Inspired by his act, the rest of his section followed suit, and other guerrillas further down the line fired rifle grenades. Apart from Dung, all of his section were killed or wounded by bullets or the shrapnel of their own grenades – but the grenade explosions broke the strained morale of the APC crews and these all pulled back. The VC had achieved the seemingly impossible feat of defeating armoured vehicles without appropriate weapons. It was now 14:30, and the ARVN assault had ground to a complete halt.

The IV ARVN Corps commander, General Huynh Van Cao (the superior to Colonel Dam), had flown to Tan Hiep at around 11:30 on hearing of the helicopter losses. He requested the use of a paratroop battalion from ARVN reserves, which was granted. The US advisors suggested that the paras be dropped to the east of Bac and Tan Thoi to prevent a VC retreat at night – but Cao was adamant about dropping them behind the M113 unit and the pinned ARVN company in front of Bac. The drop was apparently planned for 16:00.

At 15:40, the one really effective air strike of the day took place. An American observer in an L-19 directed a VNAF Skyraider (flown by a US pilot) onto the VC machinegun position at the corner of the canal line to the south of Bac. This eventually silenced the machinegun fire, but the air strike was then replaced by more ineffective artillery bombardments. The Civil Guards of Task Force B had now arrived level with Bac, and their commander (a First Lieutenant) had positioned them ready to carry out a flanking manoeuvre on the VC foxholes. However, he requested permission from Major Tho to do so – and was refused.

The time for the paradrop came and passed. In fact the paras of the 8th Parachute Battalion did not start dropping from their C-123 aircraft until 18:03. Due to a mistake from either lead pilot or jumpmaster, they dropped late in the flight path and landed to the west and northwest of Tan Thoi – directly into VC fire. The ARVN paratroops were probably their best troops, and modelled themselves on the gallant and aggressive paras of the French army in the previous war. They could not organise themselves under these conditions, and as night fell (at around 19:30) they had managed only piecemeal assaults against the VC for the loss of 19 men dead and 33 wounded.

Cao refused requests for illuminating flares to show any nocturnal VC activity, and indeed the VC evacuated at around 22:00. The ARVN and their US advisors tried to represent Ap Bac as an ARVN success (as the VC had eventually vacated their positions), but by all measures it was an unmitigated disaster. For the VC it was pure triumph.

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The View From The Other Side

The VC commander of the 261st VC Main Force Battalion was well aware that the ARVN were to attack his position around Tan Thoi on the 2nd January. A mixture of spy reports and radio intercepts (the ARVN tended to talk in uncoded language) indicated a large scale attack in the area. In fact the VC command needed a victory to maintain their support in the Mekong Delta. The 7th Division actions in 1962, with Ba's M113 squadron, helicopters, and support from VNAF fighter-bombers, had shaken the resolve of the troops and local populace. The cadre of the units – all communists with a history of fighting against the French and then Diem – could neither return to North Vietnam (who would not accept defeated officers back) nor survive for long if the VC structure collapsed. Their only answer was to find ways to defeat the new American technology and show the guerrillas that they could still win with their own resources.

Intense training, particularly of machine gunners, was undertaken to improve their abilities in anti-aircraft fire. The troops were also taught that the M113 had many vulnerabilities which could be exploited without actual anti-tank weaponry. Much of both training programmes was based on wishful thinking or dubious assumptions, but the main effect was to improve confidence in the troops. The Main Force VC were now equipped with weapons of US manufacture (taken from ARVN troops and outposts) – a mixture of M-1 rifles or carbines, and Thompson SMGs, together with a pair of BARs in most platoons, plus a .30 cal machine gun with each company. The Regional guerrillas were less well equipped, using more French rifles, as did the Village Militias.

Bac and Tan Thoi were effectively two interdependent positions linked by the irrigation canal. This meant that troops and supplies could be moved between the firing positions (which were dug into the banks under the existing foliage – rendering them almost invisible even close up). Dug-out sampans were used along the canals, and men could wade waist-deep along them (taking cover against the sides in case of air or artillery attack).

By 22:00 on the 1st December, the VC were in place. The defenders were all men from the Delta; the 514th Regional Battalion was the local unit for Dinh Tuong Province, and most of the men in 1st Company 261st Main Force Battalion were from My Tho or Ben Tre Provinces. There were about 350 guerrillas in the two hamlets – a mixed battalion of 320 men of the 261st and 514th, plus 30 village guerrillas to act as scouts, bearers and emergency replacements. The best unit – the Main Force company – was positioned in Bac with one platoon on the southern canal, and the rest (including two .30 cal machineguns and the only 60mm mortar) around the hamlet and the canal running to Tan Thoi. This hamlet was defended by the 1st Company 541st Regional Battalion, plus another platoon of Regional guerrillas, all dug in along the canal banks.

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The village guerrilla scouts had raised the alarm at about 04:00 (having heard the Civil Guards set off), and the troops manned their positions. The plan by the 261st commander was to spring a heavy ambush on the approaching ARVN, then melt away before reinforcements arrived.

However, events unfolded differently and by noon the VC commander realised that he had no escape except for eastwards across open swamp where fighter-bombers would cut his men down. The officers and NCOs passed amongst the VC positions and told the men that retreat was impossible until nightfall – it was “Better to die at your post”. While the napalm, bombing, artillery and strafing seemed ineffective to the US advisors and some of the ARVN officers, it did put the VC under intense psychological strain. The regular platoon on the canal south of Bac had their commander wounded, and together with the local guerrillas positioned with them they felt during the late morning that they were cut off and likely to be overwhelmed by any renewed ARVN assault. They contacted the company commander in Bac and requested permission to retreat. This was given (the company commander expecting to move them to positions around Bac), but the troops exhibited poor camouflage discipline and were spotted by an FAC who called in an air strike on them. Few casualties were actually caused, but the troops dispersed and would not move back into the fighting lines. The company commander requested reinforcements from Tan Thoi (which the battalion commander refused), and had to send a squad from the positions around Bac to hold the southern line. With the M113s approaching, he was sure that his position would be untenable. The continuous bombardments were affecting his men too.

In the end, as described above, the VC prevailed against four times their number of enemy – an enemy equipped with armour and artillery, and supported by helicopters and fighter-bombers. They suffered 18 KIA and 39 WIA, whilst inflicting over 80 KIA and 100+ WIA on the ARVN, together with three dead and 8 wounded Americans, plus five helicopters. The battalion commander arranged the departure time for the guerrillas at 22:00, when they began phased movements with covering detachments in case of an uncharacteristic night assault by the ARVN. The withdrawal proceeded without incident and the units moved off to the east. Men were sent to retrieve the bodies of Squad Leader Dung and his men (he had been killed during the afternoon by an air strike or artillery bombardment) – but could not locate the bodies and were worried in case the ARVN troops heard them moving around so close. As the VC stated later; “Comrade Dung would not come”. By 07:00 on the 3rd January, the VC were in their hidden camps in the swamps. Like their ancestors against the Chinese and Mongol invaders, they had inflicted a very Vietnamese victory on an overwhelming enemy. VC morale surged and ARVN fell as a result of Ap Bac.

Why The ARVN Didn't Fight?

To the American advisors, the conduct of many ARVN officers in the debacle was cowardly and reprehensible. They saw the world as a black and white “Communist vs.

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Non-Communist” struggle, and could not understand how the ARVN didn’t take the opportunity to destroy a VC regular formation. Some of the officers – Captain Ba in particular – had proven themselves brave and competent on previous occasions, so why the cowardice now?

The answers mainly lie in the political life of the ARVN and the Diem regime as a whole. Diem was more concerned by coup attempts than the VC, and disciplined officers who lost men in action to any degree. In fact he had rebuked Cao (one of his most loyal supporters) not long before the battle for taking too heavy losses in the 7th Division attacks on the VC during 1962. Major Tho was another of his political appointees who was also a local counterpoint to Cao (especially as he commanded the 2nd Armoured Cavalry Regiment). Captain Ba was a Buddhist (and as such regarded as suspect by the Catholic Diem and his cronies), who had been accused of sympathy with a previous coup attempt. Having cleared his name of this affair, he was still blocked from promotion to Major until further proof of his loyalty was forthcoming. The previous actions in the Delta had occurred when his squadron was directly attached to the 7th Division, but they had recently been transferred to the 2nd ACR and hence to Tho’s command. When ordered by Colonel Dam to advance on Bac, he had tried (without success) to contact Tho and check whether this was acceptable to his commander’s political position. At around 13:00 he managed to raise Tho and receive permission to advance.

Overall, none of the ARVN officers wanted to take the blame for losses and would rather do nothing than act aggressively and lose position in the regime. This caused inertia in ARVN actions that typified the Battle of Ap Bac. On particular set of decisions was that by Cao involving the paras. Cao wanted the battle finished and not blamed on him. One way was to place the paras in a position close to Bac but not blocking the retreat routes needed by the VC. Hopefully they would then slip away and let him try to tidy things up. While he told the US advisors (particularly Vann) that “Saigon was late” with the drop, they arrived as he had arranged (at about 18:00).

The US advisors did not always help by their naïve and condescending manner with many ARVN officers. They had no knowledge of Vietnamese culture or history, and assumed that ARVN officers were Asian versions of themselves. They were not at all aware of the social and political background to the actions by their opposite numbers.

Wargaming Ap Bac

This is probably a good one to spring on players unaware of the real history! On paper, it looks like a walkover for the ARVN, and perhaps should be presented as such.

The entire action is basically a brigade level fight, though individual actions (such as the M113s assaulting around Bac) could be fought at skirmish level. The main factors are, of course, the tendency of the ARVN to stop and go to ground, and the VC ability

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to stand and take most of what comes their way. The list of troops involved on both sides is:

ARVN 2nd Battalion 11th Infantry Regiment (3 Companies) – 330 men in total
 1st Battalion 11th Infantry Regiment (1st Company only)
 Task Force “A” (Civil Guard Battalion)
 Task Force “B” (Civil Guard Battalion)
 4th Mechanized Rifle Squadron 2nd ACR
 8th Parachute Battalion
 93rd Transportation Company (Light Helicopter)
 Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTTHC – 5 gunships)

(352nd Ranger Company was also positioned north of Tan Thoi, but did not enter the action)

Plus artillery and air support.

VC 1st Company 261st Main Force Battalion }
 1st Company 514th Regional Battalion } 320 men in total
 30 village and provincial guerrillas

There are several features of the battle which can either be randomly determined or altered from the historical events to increase playability. One is the early morning fog – if this was less of a problem then all of the 2nd/11th infantrymen would have been in place around 08:00 and then would have attacked the Tan Thoi positions earlier. Also if Tho had been less obstructive and given clearance for the Civil Guards and Ba to attack more vigorously. An earlier paradrop, and especially a better carried out version, may also have made a real difference. On the support side, if the helicopter pilots had landed further out from Bac they may not have suffered the same level of losses, and if the VNAF Skyraiders and artillery had taken note of requests to attack the tree lines rather than the hamlet of Bac, then things may have worked out differently.

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