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14 March 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Briefing of the BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES
By: Brigadier General Williamson, U.S. Army
On: The War in South Vietnam

DATE : 7 March 1966

1. General Williamson emphasized that he was speaking from the "limited viewpoint" of a combat unit commander. For the past ten months he has been in South Vietnam as the commander of a force consisting of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, Australian forces, New Zealand forces, and ARVN liaison groups. It was a balanced force (e.g., USAF aviation, infantry, artillery, tanks, medical, supply, etc.). Operations were carried out primarily in the Saigon area, except for August and September 1965, when the Pleiku and Kontum areas were involved.

2. The Viet Cong and Their Tactics. The VC are "set-piece-type operators," depending on careful planning, tedious reconnaissance, and specific instructions. Their troops are inflexible and incapable of adequate action when plans have been upset. Allied forces have been successful in exploiting this weakness by setting up several strong outposts around our bases, manning different outposts at various times and thereby thwarting VC planning efforts. From these outposts, mounted and foot patrols are carried out. Information gleaned by these patrols, plus aerial reconnaissance, form the basis for offensive operations, which have been quite successful.

3. When our operations began, we did not know the precise locations of the VC who could, as a result, lash out and destroy at a time and place of their own choosing, disappearing before government forces could reach the area attacked. Now, improved combat intelligence enables us to mount offensive operations which keep him off balance and largely on the defensive. Our reaction is much quicker; our airborne troops can support an attacked area swiftly.

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4. The VC has lost its ability to attack with large forces in the 173rd's area of operation. Since November 1965, they have had to abandon such tactics as being too costly. They are completely outgunned by our M-16 ("a wonderful little weapon"). Its rapid rate of fire (automatic or semi-automatic with 20 rounds to the clip), high velocity, light weight, and the light weight of its ammunition make it ideal for our purposes.

5. The VC can, of course, cause considerable difficulty with harrassing tactics. Its Claymore-type mines (of Chinese manufacture) give us a lot of trouble. Two of its Chinese-produced weapons, the AK-47 7.12mm assault rifle and the 12.8 mm machine-gun, are very good; the rest are not. A further difficulty is created in that the VC can move their forces very quickly, even though they move by foot. But they are being kept moving so often that, according to captured diaries, many are getting tired. Their morale is also suffering from the B-52 raids and our artillery barrages.

6. The ARVN. The ARVN are learning "at least as fast as any troops in the world." They have a low experience level by our standards, but are working very hard to get the job done. While frightened when by themselves, they are fearless, enthusiastic, and effective when employed near a larger force, particularly an American force. Unfortunately, the ARVN company or battalion commander is deterred from taking personal initiative in combat; if he suffers heavy casualties in an operation which was not ordered from above, he is in serious trouble.

7. Combat Intelligence. The picture here has improved considerably. Interrogation of VC has been accelerated since trained U.S. intelligence units have become involved. ARVN participation is, of course, still vital because of their language skills and local association. ARVN ability to capitalize on captured documents is questionable; our own intelligence people provide good and fast feedback to combat units.

8. Sophisticated intelligence methods have been extremely valuable. The best source of intelligence for the combat commander remains the five-man patrol. It is sent out by foot, helicopter, or armored personnel carrier, normally for 72 hours. Each has a radio, contacting headquarters by aircraft relay.

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9. Our Real Combat Goals. Body count is the wrong way to judge the degree of our success. We must liberate areas and not by excessive brutality or destruction. We must fight the battles so that the local civilians feel that we won properly, that we are their friends, and that we will protect them. When we do so, the civilians organize police and security forces. On virtually all such occasions, the VC have been unable to regain control.

10. To carry out this policy, General Williamson has directed his command to carry out no unnecessary killing. Firing on villages is meticulously avoided. If a village must be burned, the policy is to have local Vietnamese police or the ARVN carry it out. These efforts have been eminently successful; liberated civilians who have long been under VC control have come strongly to our side, even assisting in persuading VC conscripts to defect.

11. "How we treat civilians is as important as the guns that we shoot." Our Civic Action Program is doing very well. Our forces are helping them by instructing them in construction of buildings and wells, providing medical assistance, caring for refugees, and in many other ways. Distribution of captured foodstuffs has had noteworthy success, not the least important factor being that the population gets the idea that the government is winning and the VC are losing. In all of these civic action efforts it is vital to involve the local officials and give them full credit.

12. In Summary. General Williamson made three succinct points. First, there is a real sense of direction in our efforts; our military leaders are following a plan toward specific attainments. Second, this generation of young fighting men "is doing a whale of a good job," demonstrating good training, tactics, technical skills, and sense of humor. Third, "I firmly think that things are going better over there than people think."

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