



## US tactics in Vietnam, 1965–1972

**Bombing**

On 7 February 1965 the USA launched Operation Rolling Thunder. Rolling Thunder involved extensive bombing raids on military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. It was the beginning of an air offensive that was to last until 1972. The list of targets was soon expanded to include towns and cities in North and South Vietnam. The list also included sites in Laos and Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh trail. More bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than were dropped in the whole of the Second World War on Germany and Japan.

To some extent bombing was effective.

- It certainly damaged North Vietnam's war effort and it disrupted supply routes.
- It enabled the USA to strike at Communist forces even when it was reducing US ground forces in Vietnam after 1969.
- From 1970 to 1972, intense bombing campaigns against Hanoi (North Vietnam's capital) and the port of Haiphong forced the North Vietnamese to negotiate a truce.

However, US air power could not defeat the Communists – it could only slow them down. The Viet Cong continued to operate its supply lines. Even after major air raids on North Vietnam in 1972, the Communists were still able to launch a major assault on the South.

The cost of the air war was horrendous. The Communists shot down 14,000 US and South Vietnamese aircraft. In 1967 the *American Life* magazine calculated that it cost the USA \$400,000 to kill one Viet Cong fighter, a figure that included 75 bombs and 400 artillery shells.

**Chemical weapons**

The US developed a powerful chemical weapon called Agent Orange. It was a sort of highly toxic 'weedkiller'. It was used to destroy the jungle where the Viet Cong hid. The Americans used 82 million litres of Agent Orange to spray three and a half million hectares of jungle. Napalm was another widely-used chemical weapon. It destroyed jungles where guerrillas might hide. It also burned through skin to the bone. Many civilians and soldiers were also killed by these chemical weapons.

## SOURCE 42



A 12-year-old Vietnamese girl runs naked after losing her burning clothes from her body following a napalm attack. This photograph became one of the most searing images of the war.

## SOURCE 41



People in the South Vietnamese city of Hue sort through the wreckage of their homes after a US bombing raid in 1968.

1. 'Bad results.' Is this a fair summary of the effectiveness of bombing in the Vietnam War? Explain your answer.
2. Would you say the US ground forces in Vietnam were more or less effective than the air forces? Explain your answer.

**Search and destroy**

Bombing could not defeat a guerrilla army. The US commander General Westwood developed a policy of search and destroy. He established secure and heavily defended US bases in the south of the country and near to the coast. From here, US and South Vietnamese forces launched search-and-destroy raids from helicopters. They would descend on a village and destroy any Viet Cong forces they found. Soldiers had to send back reports of body counts.

Search-and-destroy missions did kill Viet Cong soldiers, but there were problems.

- The raids were often based on inadequate information.
- Inexperienced US troops often walked into traps.
- Innocent villages were mistaken for Viet Cong strongholds.
- Civilian casualties were extremely high in these raids. For every Viet Cong weapon captured by search-and-destroy, there was a body count of six. Many of these were innocent civilians.
- Search-and-destroy tactics made the US and South Vietnamese forces very unpopular with the peasants. It pushed them towards supporting the Viet Cong.

## SOURCE 43

*An increasing number of recruits scored a low on the standardized intelligence tests that they would have been excluded from the normal parachute army. The fear of duty in Vietnam was one year. Soldiers were most likely to die in their first month. The large majority of deaths took place in the first six months, just as a soldier began gaining experience, before sent home. A rookie army which constantly rotated inexperienced men was pitted against experienced guerrillas on their home ground.*

From *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Ellron, 1992. The average age of US combat troops in Vietnam was only 19. Many recruits had just left school. This was their first experience of war.



## 44 Image



US troops on a search-and-destroy mission in Vietnam.

**The Tet Offensive, 1968 – a turning point**

In 1968 the Communists launched a major offensive. During the Tet New Year holiday, Viet Cong fighters attacked over 100 cities and other military targets. One Viet Cong commando unit tried to capture the US embassy in Saigon. US forces had to fight to regain control soon by noon. Around 4500 fighters died down a much larger US and South Vietnamese force in Saigon for two days.

In many ways the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the Communists. They hoped that the people of South Vietnam would rise up and join them. They didn't. The Viet Cong lost around 80,000 experienced fighters and were badly weakened by it.

However, the Tet Offensive proved to be a turning point in the war because it raised hard questions about the war in the USA.

- There were nearly 500,000 troops in Vietnam and the USA was spending \$30 billion a year on the war. So why had the Communists been able to launch a major offensive that took US forces completely by surprise?
- US and South Vietnamese forces quickly retook the towns captured in the offensive, but in the process they used enormous amounts of artillery and air power. Many civilians were killed. The ancient city of Hue was destroyed (see Source 41). Was this right?

3. Why was the Tet Offensive a turning point? Explain your answer.

