

## VIETNAM WAR - THE NEW ASPECT OF WARFARE

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**Abstract:** *The article focuses on the basic characteristic of military development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On pursuance of William Lind's concept or theory of Four Generations of War, the article describes the culmination of the Third Generation of War, based on manoeuvre and mobility, coupled with air superiority. The first part deals with issues of US technical dominance in the military, the development of new ways of fighting, especially the airmobile tactics used in South Vietnam. The second part of the article focuses on the specific conditions of the Vietnam War that the US Army, for the first time, had to face while applying elements of the Fourth Generation of War. The final part focuses on the issues of implementing the theory of Four Generations of War into the Armed Forces Academy education to better understand the development of military in modern times.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam War, generations of warfare, firepower, manoeuvre

### 1. Introduction

The twentieth century is characterised by rapid acceleration of technological progress. This trend influenced the military sector and warfare as well. Deployment of new weapons, which emerged thanks to technological advancement, changed the character of war. Several authors have already tried to systematize the evolution of warfare, taking different aspects into consideration. For example, T. Wintringham divided historical eras of warfare according to the most dominant technical parameters, M. Howard with regard to predominant social characteristics and A. Toffler divides warfare development into individual waves according to "mode of production" [1].

The article explores the evolution of warfare on the basis of theory developed by an American author William Lind.

### 2. Generations of Warfare

Lind's concept called „The Four Generations of Modern War“ [2] begins at modern era, the era of wars between states. After the Peace of Westphalia 1648, the state established a monopoly on war.

The first generation is characterised by development of linear tactics. The reforms introduced during the Thirty Years' War, which were connected with large-scale deployment of firearms, marked the end of Spanish Tercios. Lines became a progressive tactical element. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new element called column tactic emerged in connection with the Napoleonic Wars. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the appearance of rifled muskets, the breechloader, barbed wire and machine guns and line or column tactic became suicidal [3]. The character of battle and warfare began to change.

The second generation of warfare emerged on the battlefields of World War I. The large-scale deployment of technological advances such as rapid-fire guns, machine guns, flamethrowers as well as armies comprising millions of soldiers gave rise to attrition warfare. The French summarized the second generation war with phrase: “The artillery conquers, the infantry occupies” [4]. The deployment of aircraft added the third dimension to combat. The end of the second generation warfare saw building of solid defensive lines (e. g. the Maginot Line built by France or the Czechoslovak border fortifications), the purpose of which was to stop an enemy’s offensive and inflict damage that would prevent adversaries from advancing.

The third generation of warfare was a logical attempt to find a way out of the existing situation. As W. Lind states: “Third Generation war, also a product of World War I, is commonly known as blitzkrieg or manoeuvre warfare. It is based not on firepower and attrition but speed, surprise, and mental as well as physical dislocation [5].” This statement can be made more precise by another Lind’s idea, according to which “the driving force was primarily Ideas” [6]. It was the new thinking that enabled the German Panzer commanders to adopt their blitzkrieg tactics successfully and gave rise to airmobile warfare used by American troops in Vietnam.

The fourth generation warfare is characterised by radical changes. Technologies and ideas remain the same, but the character of conflicts becomes different as non-state opponents emerge. The state loses its monopoly on war [7]. It is a guerrilla warfare, where non-state actors involve civilians in their fight by means of their ideology, terror and violence directed against the state and civilians. One of the basic characteristics of this generation is decentralisation [8] which leads to blurring of specific battle lines.

Fourth generation war at home poses an existential threat. If the state’s armed services

cannot defeat that threat, the state will disappear and its armed forces with it [9].

### **3. Third and Fourth Generation Warfare and the Vietnam War**

American involvement in the Vietnam War was characterised by several aspects that were completely different. The first aspect was the presence of US advisors that was aimed at consolidation of the South Vietnamese Army (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam -ARVN) and making it capable of facing the guerrilla warfare. The second aspect was the US involvement in the fight against the Viet Cong (VC) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The third aspect concerned systematic aerial assaults on North Vietnam.

The Vietnamese had some experience of guerrilla warfare from their resistance against the Japanese occupation and the French post-war colonial administration. Partisans started to oppose the regime established by the South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1957 [10].by means of minor assaults and assassinations of South Vietnamese politicians. Many of the Viet Cong’s core members were Viet Minh veterans, who were joined by approximately 2,000 soldiers infiltrated from the North. In 1958 and 1958, the number of non-state armed groups and activities steadily increased. The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was tasked to assist the South Vietnamese Army in its consolidation and its fight against insurgents.

As far as the assistance to ARVN is concerned, the US army was not ready for a guerrilla war in the first phase of the conflict due to its military experience from the World War II and the Korean War battles. South Vietnam was facing poverty, corruption and the issues concerning ethnic minorities. This situation created “a breeding ground for the emergence and spread of insurgency” [11] e. i. the ideal environment for the Viet Cong activities, which were aimed at destabilisation of the

Saigon regime and subsequent enforcement of the Viet Cong political ideologies.

The Viet Cong used the terror tactics such as abductions, murders and intimidation. It was responsible for 250 assassinations of the South Vietnamese politicians in 1959. In 1960, the number of assassinations rose to 1,400. Besides this, the Viet Cong, which was becoming increasingly powerful, attacked the ARVN troops as well [12]. The VC was gradually taking control of several provinces. For example, it seized the provincial capital of Phuoc-Vinh situated 40 miles from Saigon in autumn 1961. The South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh-Diem started to realise that the combat meant also a political fight. The Saigon government wanted to separate population from insurgents and adopt social reforms. The year 1962 saw the introduction of the Strategic Hamlet Programme, the aim of which was to secure villages from the enemy and eliminate indoctrination of population with the communist ideology [13].

The South Vietnamese Army responded to increased VC activities by stronger armament and implementation of new counter-insurgency strategies. The US army provided the South Vietnamese with the most modern infantry weapons, APCs and helicopters, which were supplied in December 1961. Another form of the US assistance to South Vietnam was the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – MACV, created on 8 February 1962.

The war was characterised by assaulting the suspected VC positions and their destruction by means of manoeuvre and firepower. The most effective method was rapid deployment of infantry units by means of helicopters and APCs followed by a fire supremacy attack supported by artillery fire. For a short time, this tactic made the VC pull back into defensive positions and stopped it from conducting more effective operations. In late 1962, the Vietcong movement seemed bound to fail and suffer a defeat. In military and combat

terms, the USA and South Vietnam were successful until the end of 1962.

However, the Viet Cong had learnt its lessons and started to defend its positions by means of anti-aircraft guns. In the Battle of Ap Bac, which took place on 2 January 1963, the AVRN was defeated. Its losses were 66 killed and 115 wounded, with 3 US advisors killed in action and another six wounded. The VC won the battle thanks to changes in its tactics and inconsistencies of the South Vietnamese command.

Conflicts in command regarding competencies reflected the political situation in South Vietnam. The Diem regime spread chaos instead of stability as it was characterised by patronage and corruption. This led to political unrest and Diem became its victim in November 1963. However, Diem's downfall did not bring any stability. What is more, it was followed by several incapable governments. As a result, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the US advisors to support the government and fight effectively against the Viet Cong, which had taken control of forty percent of the South Vietnam area in mid-1964. Besides engagement in direct combat, the VC units bombarded the US garrisons and bases. For example, the Qui Nhon hotel bombing, which took place on 10 February 1965, killed 32 US servicemen. These attacks combined with terror directed against the civilian population are typical examples of the fourth generation warfare [14].

In addition to providing supplies and training the ARVN troops, the US army was becoming increasingly active in combat. The conflict was escalating and the number of US troops in South Vietnam was increasing. In 1965, General Westmoreland stated that the VC was pushing the ARVN troops out of heavily populated areas and exposing the civilian population to communist terror. That is why he demanded that the USA deploy enough troops, who would take over the fight against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), thus enabling ARVN to protect the civilian population.

[15].Deployment of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Da Nang on 8 March 1965 became a symbol of the direct US involvement in the Vietnam War.

The war in South Vietnam developed into two parallel wars. The first one was the war against insurgents, which was a long-term conflict between Saigon and the VC for the control of the state territory. The ARVN relied on US support. This conflict was layered with a more conventional war between the US army and the NVA [16]. In this war, the VC units did not act as major enemy forces, but as a destabilising factor, which was attempting to disrupt the rear area lines of the US and South Vietnamese armies. The major role was played by the North Vietnam regular forces, which were deployed south of the DMZ and in border regions.

Encirclement of the US KheSanh Combat Base can be regarded as an example of the “parallel” war. This US base, which was located 10 km east of Laos border and 23 km south of the DMZ, was attacked by the NVA units from 21 January until 14 April 1968. General Giap tried to use the tactic thanks to which he managed to destroy the French base in Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Vietnamese artillery launched massive attacks against the base in order to enable several infantry assaults supported by armoured vehicles. After seventy days of fierce battles, the US forces managed to defend the base thanks to their firepower and aerial dominance. The North Vietnamese tactic, which was successfully used against the French in 1954, failed as it faced the US technological and technical predominance. However, it should be pointed out that the Battle of KheSanh did not yield any new experience or knowledge in tactical terms. Without air support, it could be compared to positional battles of World War I belonging to the second generation warfare. On the other hand, massive aerial support and precision bombing are characteristics of the third generation warfare.

The US forces were forced to turn to the attrition warfare and operate from their bases. They sent out their troops to sweep through the area using the search-and-destroy strategy. Upon contact with enemies, the troops tried to destroy them completely using their fire support and aerial predominance. The attrition warfare involved the VC and NVA as well as the US troops, who started to rely on their fire predominance. In almost every situation, they tried to lure the enemy and destroy him with their fire superiority. They did not follow the adversaries who broke away. R. Palmer calls this the fire phalanx tactic [17]. It was inspired by the antique Macedonian phalanx. The fire phalanx was characterised by destructive firepower, but it lacked mobility.

Mobile deployment of troops from helicopters was a higher-level strategy. The US advisors adopted the air-mobile strategy between 1960 and 1962. It was successfully used against the VC and NVA, especially by the 1stCavalry Division (Airmobile) in the Battle of Ia Drang, which took place in November 1965. The 1st Airmobile Division was equipped with the largest amount of helicopters, which were transporting infantry troops and artillery. Helicopters were still used as air artillery that supported the infantry units. Later, a special tactic of air combat surveillance, called “Hunter-Killer”, was developed [18]. Airmobile tactics became a characteristic feature of the modern warfare.

Airmobile deployment of troops as well as infantry firepower and artillery presented the highest level of the third generation warfare, which is also called the manoeuvre warfare. This tactic was adopted in operations such as “Cedar Falls”, which took place from 8 to 26 January 1967, and “Junction City”, conducted from 22 February to 14 May 1967.

Besides the aforementioned operations, the US forces were engaged in destruction of suspected or detected supply dumps and routes (especially the Ho Chi Minh trail) by

means of tactical and strategic air warfare. Like in previous operations, the US deployed the most modern technologies for identification of enemy positions, such as motion sensors, IR sensors, different types of defoliants, etc.

The most modern weapons were also used by the air forces, which were conducting the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. They deployed essential assets, such as intelligent munitions, electronic warfare, etc. In terms of Douhet's theory of airpower, the bombing of North Vietnam presented the climax of the third generation warfare in technological terms.

#### **4. Application of knowledge of the four-generation warfare**

In these days, there are no ongoing conventional conflicts, which would adopt strategies typical for 3GW. Therefore, armed forces have to be ready for deployment under the 4GW conditions, which involves changes in training of personnel and preparation of training documentation. These changes present a challenge also for the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, which is the NATO member state, and for the educational process at the Armed Forces Academy as well.

Lind's theory of the four-generation warfare was first mentioned in the process of military education at the Armed Forces Academy in a textbook called *Military Tactics* by P. Spilý and M. Hrnčiar [19]. The authors explain the basic characteristics of this theory in the history introduction. Cadets learn more about Lind's theory in

the subjects called *History of Military Art*, *History of Military Science and Technologies* as well as *Tactics*.

Even though the concept of generation warfare is fairly new in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, the contemporary security environment makes it topical.

#### **Conclusion**

During its involvement in the Vietnam War, the US army had chances of winning because it was at the height of its technological, tactical and operational advancement typical of the third generation warfare. However, the Vietnam War was different. W. Lind cites America's greatest military theorist U.S. Air Force Colonel J. Boyd: "In Vietnam we had air superiority, land superiority and sea superiority, but we lost. So I realized there is something more to it." [20]. The US troops and their allies (the South Vietnamese Army in particular) fought battles typical of the fourth generation warfare. The US forces were not ready for such a combat. When the conflict in Vietnam broke out, the US was just beginning to recognise and learn conditions of the new generation and it was not able to fully adapt to these changes. For the US army, the Vietnam War was a completely different kind of conflict. What is more, it (along with other similar conflicts such as the Algerian War) indicated a trend in the development of future warfare and undoubtedly yielded the knowledge and experience on the basis of which the world is handling the current conflicts.

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