

Sabre Squadron - Troop Definitions for the Vietnam War 1965-1975

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Contents

- Introduction
- US Army and Marine Corps
- Australian Task Force
- Republic of Korea (ROK) Army and Marines
- Royal Thai Army
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Military Forces
- Communist Forces
- Unit Strengths
- Appendix 1: Defending the Americal Division
- Sources and Notes

Introduction

The "American Phase" of the Vietnam War (aka The Second Indo-China War) started in the late 1950s and early 60's with the commitment of US money, equipment and personnel (in an advisory role), however it was not until 1965 that the US sent major ground forces to fight in Vietnam. At the same time other countries, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand also sent troops to support South Vietnam in it's fight against the communists. The "American Phase" ended in 1972 with the withdrawal of the last US combat troops. The Australians and Thai forces also left in 1972 while the Koreans remained until March the following year. From 1973 up until their final defeat in 1975 the South Vietnamese forces fought on alone.

The ratings given to the various combatants during the Vietnam War (1965-1975) are based on information gleaned from a variety of sources, the primary one being "The History of the Vietnam War" by Charles T Kamps¹. This impressive single volume account of the war allocates all of the major combatant units into one of the following categories:

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Bad

The author does not explain how these categories were arrived at but hints that they were based on "official" data and as such provide a baseline for categorising the armies within the Troop Definitions used in Sabre Squadron. They do not provide the whole story however and there is sufficient evidence available to question some of Kamps' ratings, particularly those relating to the US 23rd Americal Division.

In Sabre Squadron terms I have classified the units as follows:

Kamps' Rating	Training	Morale
Excellent	Expert	Excellent
Good	Trained	Superior
Fair	Trained	Average
Poor	Trained	Poor
Bad	Raw	Poor or Dire

This Sabre Squadron module based upon my interpretation of the historical background and understanding of the rules. Any historical errors are mine, however players are encouraged to use the wealth of available historical material to do their own research, particularly when examining actual battles where details of the units involved are known.

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1 Kamps' book is probably the best single volume account of the war which looks at the overall history and is worth picking up a copy if only for the orders of battle given in the Appendices. However, he does support the idea that the Americal Division was some sort of perennial failure, and seems to tar all who served in it with the same brush, despite more modern evidence to the contrary.

US Army and Marine Corps

While there can be no doubt that units such as the 1st Cavalry Division (aka "The Cav" or "The First Team"), the 173rd Airborne Brigade (aka "The Herd" and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (aka "The Black Horse Regiment") were considered outstanding formations, the case of other US units is not so clear cut. There are a number of factors which should be considered when rating US units.

Firstly, between 1965 and 1967 the formations deployed to Vietnam mostly comprised volunteer regular soldiers with a cadre of experienced career officers and ncos. In addition, during the early years the war was frequently looked on as an adventure and the young troops were often keen to have a chance to prove themselves on the battlefield. The American "can do" philosophy meant that motivation and morale were high.

Secondly, elite units, such as the Cavalry and Airborne units, often had the pick of talented young officers and career ncos as well as volunteer soldiers who wished to serve in units in which they felt themselves part of an elite, and also in which they felt they had a better chance of survival. The US Marine Corps being the Marine Corps, naturally considered themselves an elite, regardless of what anyone else thought.

Unit cohesion began to be affected towards the end of 1967, when heavy casualties during the preceding two years coupled with the rotation home of time expired troops (US army soldiers served 12 months in Vietnam, Marines served 13 months) meant that the disciplined and closely knit units which entered the war in 1965 and 1966 were becoming increasingly fragmented due to the turnover in personnel.

Also about this time the US military found that it was unable to supply enough trained soldiers to keep the forces in Vietnam up to strength and the draft was increased to try and build up the numbers. This introduced a new generation of not so willing conscripts to the war (although in fact the majority of soldiers were still volunteers). In addition, again partly due to heavy losses amongst junior officers (Lieutenant to Captain ranks) and long service ncos, replacements were pushed through the system as quickly as possible, with a consequent lowering of both standards and ability which affected the combat effectiveness of the units. Many units at this time were already operating with front line companies at 50 or 60 percent of their authorised strength. Naturally the elite formations such as the airborne still managed to attract a higher percentage of volunteers and career officers and ncos.

By 1969 the US Government was trying to find a way to extricate itself from the war and in June President Nixon announced troop reductions to reduce the forces stationed in Vietnam. This was a tacit acceptance that the war was no longer considered winnable and morale and discipline began to decline from this point. Generally, most of the problems associated with drug use, race relations, poor morale and lax discipline were more often to be found in the rear echelon units rather than the front line infantry and other combat troops, however this was not always the case and all units, including the elite formations suffered a decline in combat effectiveness.

By 1971, nobody wanted to be the last soldier to die in Vietnam and units operated accordingly. Search and Destroy missions became "search and avoid" where units actively avoided contact with the enemy and "combat refusals" began to be reported in the media. One notable incident involved a company from the 1st Cavalry and occurred in front of a TV news camera crew.

The worst case scenario - the Americal Division; myth, opinion and reality

The US 23rd Infantry Division (11th, 196th and 198th Light Infantry Brigades), usually known as the Americal Division, has often been claimed as the worst formation to serve in Vietnam and is rated as Bad in the book by Kamps. Other authors, even those with Vietnam experience, have also rated the Division poorly, often accompanied by scathing comments about the lack of discipline, with one author even going so far as to describe the line companies of the 11th Brigade as little better than gangs of armed thugs.

To justify this claim the most often quoted examples are generally:

- The actions of C Company, 1/20th Infantry and B Company 4/3rd Infantry at the My Lai Massacre on the 16th March 1968. The actions of C Company, and in particular the soldiers of Lt William Calley's platoon are the most notorious.
- The defence of Firebase Mary Ann in March 1971 where, so it is claimed, the defenders "cringed in their bunkers" while the enemy attacked the base.
- The alleged "rout" of the 1/46th Infantry and 2/1st Infantry at Kham Duc in 1968.

The My Lai Massacre, which occurred within several months of the 11th Infantry Brigade deploying to Vietnam, was unarguably the result of poor training, inexperienced soldiers and ncos, and serious and inexcusable leadership

failures on the part of both officers and ncos within C Company itself and further up the chain of command. Tragically, the one man whose presence or intervention would possibly have prevented the massacre, SSgt George Cox - an experienced and respected platoon sergeant, was killed two days earlier by a booby trap, further weakening the leadership within Lt Calley's platoon.²

The attack on Firebase Mary Ann was not simply the result of any discernible incompetence on the part of the soldiers but involved a number of circumstances which, when combined, left the Firebase vulnerable at the time when the enemy attacked. With regard to the "rout" at Kham Duc, I have yet to find any firm evidence that the two US battalions "routed", however there are a number of eyewitness accounts which state that the Vietnamese CIDG soldiers did flee.

When examining the historical record of the three brigades which formed the Americal Division the evidence shows that:

1. The Brigades initially performed poorly during the first few months of their deployment. This was not necessarily due to the quality or lack of training of the soldiers themselves, although the units did include a higher number of draftees and inexperienced junior ncos than was usually found in other units. This was however the result of being rushed into active service, coupled with a lack of higher level training at the company, battalion and brigade levels, and staff shortages and inexperience at the higher command levels which hindered operational abilities at all levels³. After six months these problems were generally resolved as the units and their parent formations settled down and gained practical experience in operations. In addition, it should be noted that as Light Infantry Brigades, these units did not have as much "heavy" logistical backup as some of the other Divisional sized units in Vietnam.
2. During the last years of the war, from 1969 until 1972, morale and combat motivation in the Division declined as the US Army began to withdraw from the war. This however was an Army wide problem affecting all major combat units and was not unique to the Americal Division.
3. Examination of the combat records of the individual infantry units which made up the Division indicates that at the company and battalion level, while they might not have been as effective as some of the "elite units" they generally performed as well as, and certainly no worse, than any other American infantry unit. The 196th Brigade, for example, spent the majority of its war fighting regular North Vietnamese Army units and one of its infantry battalions, 3/21st Infantry, was awarded a Valorous Unit Citation for its actions at Tien Phuoc and Tam Ky in 1968. The 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry was similarly awarded a Valorous unit citation for its actions in Quang Tin province the same year.
4. The 196th Light Infantry Brigade remained in Vietnam until June 1972 and was the last American brigade to serve in Vietnam. The last ground combat unit to leave Vietnam was the 3rd battalion 21st Infantry which departed in August 1972.
5. Fifteen soldiers from the Division were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their actions in Vietnam. The award of other decorations for bravery was on a par with other formations.

After considering the evidence concerning the combat effectiveness of the Americal Division I consider that the brigades should be rated lower during the initial 6 months of their deployment, after which time they are comparable with other US units. After mid 1969 their morale rating is reduced to reflect the late war decline of US morale. However, this will affect all US units during this time period (see Optional Rule - The Decline of Morale)

Optional Rule - the Decline of Morale

To represent the decline in morale amongst US combat units from July 1969 onwards (following the announcement of troop withdrawals by the US President) the morale rating of ALL American units from this date is reduced to the next lower level (eg Superior drops to Average and Average drops to Poor). Note that if you are using the points system to generate your forces, US units still pay the costs for the Higher morale level. You do not get cheaper troops, just lower morale.

2 Report of the Department of the Army - Review of the Preliminary Investigations of the My Lai Incident Volume 1: report of the Incident

3 Report of the Department of the Army - Review of the Preliminary Investigations of the My Lai Incident Volume 1: report of the Incident

US Marine Corps	Training	Morale	Notes
3rd Marine Division 3rd & 4th Marines 9th Marines ⁴	Expert Trained	Excellent Superior	
1st Marine Division 1st, 5th & 7th Marines	Trained	Superior	
5th Marine Division ⁵ 26th & 27th Marines	Trained	Average	
US Army	Training	Morale	Notes
1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment 1st Brigade - 101st Airborne Division 173rd Airborne Brigade	Expert	Excellent	These units had a good combat performance due to high standards of personnel, training and equipment.
1st Infantry Division (pre 1969) ⁶ 25th Infantry Division 1st Bde - 5th Infantry Division (Mech)	Trained	Superior	After 1969 1st Infantry Division is classed as Trained/Average
4th Infantry Division 9th Infantry Division 2nd Bde - 101st Airborne Division 3rd Bde - 82nd Airborne Division 199th Light Infantry Brigade	Trained	Average	
23rd (Americal) Infantry Division ⁷ 11th Light Infantry Brigade December 1967 - June 1968 Thereafter 196th Light Infantry Brigade (Chargers) August 1966 - February 1967 Thereafter 198th Light Infantry Brigade September 1967 - March 1968 Thereafter	 Trained Trained Trained Trained Trained Trained	 Poor Average Poor Average Poor Average	Formed in situ in Vietnam in September 1967
US SF led Mike Forces (1965 - 1970)	Trained	Good (Nung Chinese) or Average (Others)	These operated as light infantry led by US Special Forces officers and Ncos

- 4 The 9th Marines had a reputation for bad luck and heavy casualties - they were nicknamed "The Walking Dead"
- 5 The 26th and 27th Marines were sent to Vietnam as individual regiments and not as part of a formed Division. In order to bring them up to strength they were built up with a high proportion of draftees rather than volunteer marines. The 27th in particular had a very short period for training prior to deployment.
- 6 By the end of 1969 even morale of the 1st Infantry Division "The Big Red One", was declining. With increasing numbers of draftees in it's ranks it received the new nickname "The Big Dead One"
- 7 The Americal Division was formed in late 1967 and comprised the 11th, 196th and 198th Infantry Brigades. Although the 196th Brigade had arrived in Vietnam in 1966, the other brigades arrived in September and December 1967. In all three cases the Brigades had been hurriedly formed and, as a consequence suffered from severe staff and personnel shortages, poor organisation and very limited training. Their combat performance initially fell far below those of the units which had been deployed in a more efficient fashion. Unfortunately, despite many instances of heroism and bravery by the soldiers themselves, the Americal Division earned a reputation for poor discipline and low morale.

The Australian Task Force (1ATF)

Please note - for brevity the term "Australian" also includes the New Zealand troops who fought alongside them. New Zealand provided one or two infantry companies to 1 ATF which were attached to the Australian infantry battalions from December 1967 through to 1971. Elements of the NZ SAS and an artillery battery also served in Vietnam.

The Australians and New Zealanders performed well in Vietnam and were some of the most highly trained and respected troops in the field. Unlike the Americans the Australian army rotated entire units through Vietnam in one year deployments. These units comprised both regular soldiers and National Servicemen (often known as "Nasho's") who knew each other, trained and worked together. In addition they were led by well trained and professional officers and ncos, many being career soldiers with years of service and experience. Australia's peak commitment at any one time was 7,672 combat troops and New Zealand's, 552, in 1969.

The Australians regularly encountered VC Main Force and NVA units, most notably at the Battle of Long Tan in 1966 and gave a good account of themselves but, overall, the tactics used by the Australian Army in Vietnam were not successful. Like the Americans, Australian tactics were focused on seeking to engage the Communist forces in battle and ultimately failed as the Communists were generally able to evade Australian forces when conditions were not favourable. Moreover, the Australians did not devote sufficient resources to disrupting the logistical infrastructure which supported the Communist forces in Phước Tuy Province and popular support for the Communists remained strong. After 1 ATF was withdrawn in 1971 the insurgency in Phước Tuy rapidly expanded (*Palazzo, Albert (2006). Australian Military Operations in Vietnam*).

After 1969, and following the decision by the USA to withdraw its troops from Vietnam, the Australian the Task Force was gradually reduced in strength prior to the last infantry battalion being withdrawn in 1971, leaving an administrative party to close down the Task Force and leaving in March 1972.

Knowing that the Australians were leaving the communist forces generally kept clear of them in the final years resulting in fewer contacts and only two major engagements in 1971. However, the Australian Task Force did not experience the breakdown of morale and discipline experienced by the US Army and Marines.

Australian	Training	Morale	Notes
1st Australian Task Force ⁸	Expert	Excellent	Australian units, mostly regular soldiers, had a high combat capability due to high quality of personnel, training, equipment levels and motivation.

8 The Australians were considered some of the best troops in Vietnam. The bulk of the troops were regular soldiers but with a number of conscripts. Well trained, confident and well equipped they were respected by friend and foe alike.

Republic of Korea (ROK) Army and Marines

From September 1964 to March 1973, South Korea sent more than 300,000 troops to South Vietnam. The South Korean Army and Marine Corps made up the ground combat element. However, in the west very little is known about the South Korean contribution during the war other than the fact that the Korean forces had a reputation for being tough, aggressive fighters with a fondness for the Korean martial art Taekwondo (which was part of their training and fitness regimes). The South Korean troops were indeed well trained, tough, disciplined and motivated as well as fiercely anti-communist, but they also established a reputation for brutality and being heavy handed with the local Vietnamese population.

The ROK forces were based on the organisations and doctrine used by the US Army and Marine Corps, and similarly, but not as lavishly, equipped. In combat they proved to be more than equal to the task of taking on the Viet Cong and NVA and there are many claims that they inflicted far more casualties on the enemy than they themselves suffered, one account claiming a kill ratio of 24:1. In practice however, although they did operate in co-operation with US and Vietnamese forces, the Korean units generally did not operate well with other nationalities and relations with the US and South Vietnamese forces were often strained as the Korean commanders appeared to be operating to their own agenda in many cases.

The Korean forces were initially deployed to the Tuy Hoa Valley, a relatively unpopulated part of South Vietnam, taking responsibility for security in that area. During the Tet offensive in 1968 the Korean troops were redeployed to the Da Nang and Quảng Nam Province region, a much more densely populated area, where their heavy handed methods caused problems.

There was also a darker side to the Korean operations. Reports indicate the operations in the Tuy Hoa Valley covered up a series of massacres and atrocities committed against civilians, and the Koreans were reported to have begun systemic, widespread depopulation of the region while claiming civilians killed, often women and children, were "enemy combatants". As a result otherwise neutral villagers began joining the Viet Cong. Starting in 1966 Korean forces are reported to have begun depopulating wider areas in Quảng Ngãi Province in response to a series of effective ambushes by the NVA/VC. Korean-controlled sectors became less-populated during the war, as civilians began leaving en-masse and Viet Cong control was reported to have increased with many joining their ranks.

The transfer of ROK forces from a relatively underpopulated to a populated sector during Tet in 1968 led to further problems which undermined ongoing pacification efforts and caused a deterioration of relations with locals, particularly as a result of the Phong Nhị and Phong Nhất massacre, which is now widely accepted as a war crime. (Smith, Robert M. (10 January 1970). "Vietnam Killings Laid to Koreans". *The New York Times* and Elliott, Mai (2010-02-08). *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era*)

After the Tet Offensive, ROK forces were transferred back to their previous, underpopulated sector in II Field Force/II Corps and became reluctant to engage in offensive operations in order to minimise casualties.

It is believed that part of the reason why Korean forces were alleged to engage in atrocities and the casual brutality of South Korean forces, was due to many senior officers having been Japanese-trained while serving under Japanese command in WW2. Many ROK officers themselves followed the same doctrines during the Korean War with Chae Myung-shin (the General Officer commanding ROK forces in Vietnam) and others being participants of the Jeju Massacre, Bodo League massacre and the Ganghwa massacre. (Miyoshi, Sheila (2007). *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*)

Needless to say, the ROK forces did not have any problems with declining morale, discipline etc which hampered the US forces later in the war. For Sabre Squadron purposes however, I have to agree with the fact that the militarily the ROK forces were very effective on the battlefield and therefore rate them as follows:

Army Characteristics

- Diehards - ROK units in a defending force may be classed as Diehards (optional)

Republic of Korea (ROK) Army and Marines	Training	Morale	Notes
Capital "Tiger" Division 9th "White Horse" Division	Trained	Superior	Equipped similarly to the ARVN
2nd "Blue Dragon" Marine Brigade	Expert	Excellent	Equipped similarly to the ARVN

Royal Thai Army

In October 1967 the Royal Thai Volunteer Regiment (Queen's Cobras) was sent to Camp Bearcat at Bien Hoa. Prior to deploying the the Cobra's received the benefit of three months training by US Specials Forces instructors.

In 1968 the Cobras were replaced by the Royal Thai Army Expeditionary Division ("Black Panthers"). About 40,000 Thai military would serve in South Vietnam, with 351 killed in action and 1,358 wounded. The last Thai ground forces were withdrawn from South Vietnam on 5 February, 1972.

By all accounts, the Thai troops fought well. From their base at Bear Cat Camp in Bien Hoa Province, they clashed with the Viet Cong in medium and small engagements along the vital National Route 15 linking the port of Vung Tau to areas surrounding Saigon. Thai newspapers of the day reported the successes in impressive ratios of enemy soldiers to Thai dead that looked like winning tallies of a sports score, such as "In 150 Fights, 100 [Thais] Are Dead, 1000 Viet Cong Are Killed." (*Richard A Ruth "Why Thailand Takes Pride in the Vietnam War" NY Times Nov 7 2016*)

The Thai Buddhist religion also influenced the Thai soldier's behaviour and most combat soldiers wore Buddhist amulets into battle. The more devout wore dozens in crisscrossing strings around their torsos. These Thai troops harbored great faith in the amulets' protective power. They took the Americans' enthusiasm for this prodigious display as evidence of the Buddhist amulets' superiority over similar Christian charms such as a cross or a St. Christopher medal. And they happily shared their amulets with any American who asked for one. Some felt that the charms focused their minds in a firefight; the Buddha was a paragon whose mastery of meditative calm in the face of an enemy would help them avoid fear and panic. Buddhist statues accompanied Thai troops in armored personnel carriers and trucks. (*Richard A Ruth "Why Thailand Takes Pride in the Vietnam War" NY Times Nov 7 2016*)

The Thai soldiers also delighted in the affordable American consumer goods they encountered in the military post exchanges, or PXs. They saved up their pay to buy their first SLR cameras, televisions, refrigerators, stereo systems, champagne, Scotch and Playboy magazines. This focus on materialism would taint their reputation. The zest with which Thai soldiers sought American goods at the PX stores caught the attention of international journalists. Reports describing the Thai soldiers' involvement in schemes to sell PX goods to Saigon's black market appeared in the American press, including in The New York Times. (*Richard A Ruth "Why Thailand Takes Pride in the Vietnam War" NY Times Nov 7 2016*)

Despite being rated highly by Kamp, and praised by Ruth (see above) there is little material available to justify giving the Thai forces such a high rating. A declassified CIA report from 1974 states that while training at up to battalion level was considered satisfactory field training above battalion level was seldom carried out, due to both budgetary constraints and a lack of interest from senior officers. The report went on to state that the army was deficient in certain abilities, including combined arms training, night training and effective utilisation of jungle and mountainous terrain. The Army's complex and outdated logistics system also meant that there were difficulties in supplying units even in peacetime.

For Sabre Squadron I rate the Royal Thai forces as follows:

Army Characteristics

- Irresolute Higher Command - "Black Panther" units have Irresolute Higher Command

Royal Thai Army	Training	Morale	Notes
Royal Thai Volunteer Regiment (Queen's Cobras) 1967-1968	Trained	Superior	Equipped primarily with WW2 weapons and equipment but small arms upgraded to include M16, M-79 and M60 weapons
"Black Panther" Expeditionary Division 1968 - 1972	Trained	Average	

Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Military Forces

Of all the soldiers who fought in Vietnam the ARVN are probably the most maligned and vilified. However, the evidence shows that when well led and well equipped the ARVN soldier could fight well. The tragedy is that the South Vietnamese soldiers were badly let down and deserved more from their political and military masters, as well as their allies.

In many cases the problems were not the fault of the soldiers but were the result of inefficient or incompetent leadership (which failed to provide battlefield leadership or adequate training), corruption (which saw ammunition, rations and other supplies sold for profit) or political interference (which had a serious affect on operational ability).

The average ARVN enlisted man came from a rural peasant background, unsuited for the complexities of a US style military system, while the majority of the officer corps came from the educated urban elite. These differences did little to encourage mutual trust between the two groups. It is in fact remarkable that the ARVN soldier fought as well and as long as he did.

During the period 1965 -1968 the US and their allies shouldered the main burden of the war and, under US direction, attempting to fight a "big unit" war by bringing the enemy to battle where he could be destroyed by superior firepower. To an extent the ARVN was marginalised at this point, being relegated to supporting Allied units, or in static pacification roles. It has been alleged that, by the end of 1967, this policy had both hindered the development of the ARVN combat capability and also caused resentment amongst US troops who saw the ARVN forces allocated to "Safe" missions while Americans bore the brunt of the fighting. At the same time the ARVN became accustomed to the lavish support logistical support offered by the Americans and would suffer accordingly when it was withdrawn.

Once the US announced the Vietnamisation process, whereby the ARVN would take up the defence of their country as the American forces withdrew, the ARVN was expected to pick up where the Americans left off but was rarely given the time or facilities to properly prepare. Much of the US equipment left in Vietnam was turned over to the ARVN but, lacking sufficient trained troops, technicians and the logistical backup to use them effectively, these second hand assets did not produce the expected or desired results. Further US cutbacks in military aid from the early 1970s saw the amount of ammunition and other vital logistical assets reduced to the point where the ARVN operations were severely hampered if not curtailed. By the beginning of 1975 over 200 aircraft were unserviceable, as was half the riverine fleet and 4,000 military vehicles. ARVN units were lucky if they fielded 60% of their authorised strength. In any case even if the ARVN had managed to fill out its units, with ammunition stocks at a fraction of the 1972 levels the ARVN only had sufficient ammunition for several months of high intensity combat.

In the Case of the ARVN, the unit assessment given in the Kamp book seems to be about right. The ARVN military varied from excellent to bad but even the worst units were sometimes able to rise to the occasion and perform well.

Sabre Squadron ratings are given below:

Army Characteristics	
● Irresolute Higher Command - ARVN Units with a Morale Rating of Poor or Worse have Irresolute Higher Command. This also applies to CIDG and RF/PF units.	
● Poor Communications - CIDG and RF/PF units have Poor Communications	

Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Military Forces	Training	Morale	Notes
1st ARVN Division	Trained	Superior	Morale reduced to Average in 1974-75 as a result of almost constant combat and weak leadership
2nd ARVN Division	Trained	Poor	
3rd ARVN Division ⁹	Raw	Poor	Post 1973 adjust rating to: Trained Average
5th ARVN Division	Raw	Poor	5th Division considered "Marginally effective in 1965-66

9 The 3rd ARVN Division had a generally poor record. In 1972, with an incompetent Divisional commander, it bore the brunt of the 1972 Spring Offensive. With a new commander it's performance improved somewhat in 1974-75

7th ARVN Division ¹⁰	Trained	Poor	Rated as Trained/Average for 1972-1973 due to good leadership
9th ARVN Division	Raw	Poor	one of the worst ARVN Divisions
18th ARVN Division ¹¹	Raw	Poor	18th Division considered the worst unit in the ARVN
21st ARVN Division	Trained	Average	Morale declines to Poor from 1973-1975
22nd ARVN Division 40th Regiment 41st Regiment 47th Regiment	Trained Raw Trained	Average Poor Poor	
23rd ARVN Division 42nd, 45th & 53rd Regiments 44th Regiment	Trained Raw	Poor Poor	
ARVN Armored Brigades and Tank Battalions	Trained	Superior	ARVN Armored units had a good record for combat reliability and morale and were frequently used to bolster ARVN infantry units.
ARVN Airborne Division ¹²	Expert	Excellent	1974-1975 classed as Trained/Superior due to heavy casualties between 1972 -73
ARVN Marine Division ¹³	Expert	Excellent	
ARVN Special Mobile Corps Rangers) 1965 until end of 1969 1970 - 1975	Trained Trained	Superior Average	From 1970 until end of war rated as Trained/Average due to influx of CIDG and ex-deserters and convicts. Frequently used to bolster regular ARVN infantry units.
Mike Forces (1965 - 1970) ¹⁴	Trained	Average	
ARVN CIDG Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF aka "Ruff Puffs")	Trained Raw	Poor Poor	Poor Communications

10 The 7th Division was considered poor and only marginally combat effective however in 1972 and 1973, under the command of the inspirational leadership of Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, the Division performed well and even established local superiority over the VC and NVA in 1973.

11 The 18th Division was notoriously bad, however during the final defence of Saigon in 1975 the Division was heavily reinforced with amour and airborne troops and performed creditably at the Battle of Xuan Loc.

12 The ARVN Airborne units were considered an elite formation and for most of its existence was allocated to the General Reserve under the direct command of the General Staff. Usually operating as infantry and deployed via helicopter or air transport assets, the airborne units were frequently used as a "fire brigade". Unlike other ARVN units which remained in fixed Provincial and District locations for long periods of time, the airborne troops could be sent to any part of the country where it was required. After such operations the units would regroup, recruit and train for the next one. Such was the prestige of the airborne units that there was generally no shortage of potential recruits. Following heavy casualties between 1972 and 1973 the morale of the Airborne troops was weakened and never fully recovered.

13 The Vietnamese Marine Corps was, like the airborne forces, considered an elite and was held as part of the General Reserve. It was copied directly from the US Marine Corps model, even down to company, platoon and squad organisations. Although trained for riverine and amphibious operations the Marines were generally used as high quality airmobile infantry, carrying out the same "fire brigade" role as the airborne units. Again, as an elite formation recruiting was generally not a problem.

14 MIKE forces were led by US Special Forces officers and ncos until 1970 when they were turned over to the ARVN under the Vietnamisation programme. The better units were incorporated into the ARVN Rangers while the rest became part of the CIDG.

Communist Forces

"I would give anything to have 200 of them under my command. They are the finest soldiers I have ever seen."

Attributed to Major Charles Beckwith US Army, Vietnam 1965

"What, then, had we learned with our sacrifices in the Ia Drang Valley? We had learned something about fighting the North Vietnamese regulars - and something important about ourselves. We could stand against the finest light infantry troops in the world and hold our ground."

Lieutenant General Harold G. "Hal" Moore

The Communist Forces can be divided into three basic components, each of which fought with an organisation and methods specific to its role:

- The People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN), also known as the NVA (North Vietnamese Army)
- The VC Main Force units
- The VC Regional and Local Force units

The People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN), also known as the NVA (North Vietnamese Army)

Recruitment for the PAVN was primarily based on the military draft of North Vietnam, and most NVA soldiers served for the duration of the conflict. There were no "rotations" back to the homeland. The typical recruit was a rural youth in his early 20s, with three years of prior compulsory training and indoctrination in various militia and construction units. Compared to their VC counterparts most NVA had a higher standard of literacy. While his preparation was not especially impressive by Western standards, the typical NVA soldier proved more than adequate for the task at hand. NVA training was surprisingly conventional, with little special emphasis on jungle warfare. Most of the troops' learning occurred on the job. Service and indoctrination under the communist system prior to army recruitment made the typical NVA fighter a bit older and more seasoned than his American or ARVN opponent. Throughout the conflict, NVA defections and surrenders were extremely low, especially compared to that of the VC, a testimony to their motivation and organization¹⁵.

The VC Main Force units

The elite of the VC were the *chu luc* or Main Force Units, made up of full-time fighters. Many of the soldiers were southern-born and had been trained in the north before re-infiltrating back to fight in the south. A majority of main-force fighters were party members and, armed and equipped in a similar manner to the NVA, could operate in battalion or even regimental size strengths.

The Viet Cong Regional and Local Force units

The Regional (or territorial) units were full-time soldiers but usually served within or close to their home provinces. They did not have the degree of literacy of the main-force personnel, and did not have the percentage of Party members present in their ranks. They were not as well armed as the *chu luc* and usually operated in units that seldom exceeded company strength.

The Local Forces

The Local Forces were the typical guerilla soldiers. These village, hamlet or local guerrillas were mostly peasant farmers and part-time fighters. Their tasks included carrying out minor harassment operations such as sniping or mine/booby trap laying, building local fortifications or supply caches, and transporting supplies and equipment.

An assessment of the PAVN

The PAVN of the Vietnam War was not a typical Communist army. It faced a number of unique challenges with regard to training, troop motivation, terrain and logistics. The leaders of the PAVN rose to the challenge and managed to forge an army which earned a grudging respect among those they fought for their discipline, morale and skill. The soldiers of the PAVN have even been called the finest light infantry in the world by their former American opponents.

Whereas in the Warsaw Pact, the conscripts would be called up, serve their time and go home, the soldiers of the PAVN were in for the duration of the war or until they were either killed or invalidated out as a result of wounds or disease. This allowed the PAVN to learn from and build on their experience in a way which was impossible for the American military (with its emphasis on one year tours for soldiers and six month command positions for officers). As a result many of its officers, ncos and soldiers were extremely experienced field soldiers. One major benefit of

15 Wikipedia: Viet Cong and PAVN strategy, organization and structure

this was that units which were withdrawn from combat after heavy casualties to rest and refit could be rebuilt around an experienced and well trained cadre within a relatively short space of time (the German army used a similar system in WW2 to rebuild its shattered Divisions on the Eastern Front).

The PAVN soldier was very tightly controlled by means of constant supervision, a 3-man cell structure, regular *kiem thao* "criticism and self-criticism" sessions and political education and propaganda. However, this did not mean that their tactics, doctrine and training were equally tightly controlled or rigid and inflexible. To make the most of the combat experience gained at such great cost, soldiers of all ranks were encouraged to participate in planning for operations and to come up with ideas and suggestions to improve their combat performance. This also had the benefit of giving the soldiers a sense of value, in that they felt that they were not merely cannon fodder but that experiences and ideas had merit and were valued by their commanders.

During the early years of 1965-1966 the PAVN did not perform particularly well for several reasons. Initially they were unfamiliar with the terrain and climate in South Vietnam and they were still trying to establish the best way in which to fight the Americans. One other major problem however was that the PAVN units had a severe leadership problem. Commanders ran away from the enemy or were not with their units. They were also afraid to report negative news. This lack of trust in subordinates and leadership occurred due to fear of retribution for failure and mistakes. However, as the PAVN gained experience and learned, so it grew in ability and confidence and a cadre of well trained, battle hardened and experienced officers and ncos emerged, who could lead by example and encourage their soldiers to emulate them. At the same time the soldiers learned that their commanders were generally competent professionals who knew what they were about. This is not to imply that the PAVN changed overnight, but rather that a combination of shared hardships, danger and difficulties, combined with an awareness of the capabilities of both the leaders and the led, meant that the PAVN developed remarkably quickly into an army which could learn and adapt. The nature of the fighting, and the limitations imposed by the terrain in South Vietnam, also fostered a necessary self-reliance in the PAVN units - with only limited communications commanders could not realistically maintain tight control over their units and once committed to action, had to let things run their course. Of course careful planning and briefing ensured that their subordinates knew what was required of them, but they also knew how to make their own decisions when the situation changed or events did not go as planned.

Finally, during the ten years between 1965 and 1975, the PAVN Divisions and Regiments suffered a level of attrition from battle and disease which would have crippled or destroyed most armies¹⁶, yet each time they withdrew, rested and reconstituted and then, when they were ready, they returned to the fight. Why? Because the PAVN soldier also knew *why* he he was fighting - he believed that he was fighting a just war to free the South Vietnamese people from foreign occupation and political corruption. He believed that the US bombing of his home country was an illegal act. Perhaps equally important, he knew that the government and people of North Vietnam fully supported him.

16 In a interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1969, the North Vietnamese Commander General Vo Nguyen Giap had admitted that by early 1969 the NVA had lost half a million men killed.

Army Characteristics

- Poor Communications - VC and NVA units have Poor Communications
- Centralised Command - This Characteristic is **NOT** applied to the Communist Forces, reflecting their versatility, flexibility and motivation on the battlefield when compared with other Communist conscript armies.
- Viet Cong Regional and Local Force units are Irregular

Communist Forces			
People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN)	Training	Morale	Notes
NVA Divisions (except those listed below) 1965 - 1966 1967 - 1975	Trained Trained	Average Superior	Poor Communications
711th Division (renamed 2nd Division in 1973) 968th Division	Trained	Poor	Poor Communications The 711th was known to have poor morale and the 968th had low level of combat effectiveness
Viet Cong Main Force units	Trained	Poor	Poor Communications
Viet Cong Main Force units (post Tet 1968)	Trained	Average	Poor Communications (After Tet 68 the Main Force units were filled out with NVA regulars)
Viet Cong Regional Forces Viet Cong Local Forces	Trained Raw	Poor Poor	Irregular

Unit "paddy" strength versus TO&E numbers

Most of the combat units operating in the field during the Vietnam War were substantially understrength when compared to the numbers of personnel shown on the TO&E tables. This applies as much to the Communist forces as it does to the South Vietnamese and Free World forces.

Needless to say, while there is plenty of information regarding the organisation and strength of the US army, there is considerably less so on the Korean, Thai and Communist forces.

the following information has been culled from the various sources and is intended as a guide for organising units for use with Sabre Squadron.

US Army and Marine Corps

Unless the unit is within several months of it's initial deployment (in which case it might well be still at or near full strength), most companies and platoons would be operating at about 60-65% of their authorised strength. In this case an ordinary US infantry company would muster about 100 - 110 soldiers as opposed to the authorised strength of 181 officers and men. Similarly a US Marine company would have 216 men in its authorised TO&E but would likely put 120 - 130 in the field. Heavy combat over a short period could frequently reduce the numbers down to well below 50% TO&E strengths.

Examples include the 173rd Airborne brigade following the fighting around Dak To in November 1967, where the rifle companies in the brigade suffered an average of 51% casualties each in one month.¹⁷

In addition to the limited numbers of troops, the actual organisations changed, usually either due to reorganisation as a result of the manpower shortage or to meet a specific task requirement.

While the authorized strength and equipment according to Tables of Organization and Equipment (TO&Es) is listed in this work, the reality was vastly different, and TO&Es had little meaning. Units were habitually understrength with shortages of officers, NCOs, and specialists particularly common. It was not unusual for rifle companies to be as low as 50 percent strength. The allocation and employment of weapons and vehicles were often much different than that found in the TO&Es. Some weapons were withdrawn, especially recoilless rifles, and mortars were reduced. Other types of weapon were increased.¹⁸

Incidentally, from early 1970 through early 1972, when the US troop withdrawal was in full swing, personnel from departing units were often transferred to remaining units for the duration of their tour of duty. This resulted in an increase in personnel in the front line units during this period bringing the numbers much closer to the official TO&E.¹⁹

ARVN Forces

ARVN units (up to Divisional level) were also frequently understrength. Kamps states that ARVN units were fortunate if they mustered 60% of their TO&E and were often at far less. The formations with Poor or Bad ratings however were usually at even lower levels, which partially accounts for their poor combat performance. Such units might well be at 35 - 40% of their TO&E.

While is a matter of record that the ARVN elite formations, the Airborne and Marines, tended to find it easier to recruit, their use as "fire brigade" units to counter-attack or to retrieve a poor situation during emergencies meant that when in action they tended to take correspondingly heavy casualties (for example, in December 1964, the 4th Marine Battalion was ambushed by elements of the Viet Cong 9th Division near the Quang Giao rubber plantation. During the ensuing battle the Marines suffered 60% casualties). Once they had completed their mission the elite units would usually be withdrawn to rest and refit. However, under normal circumstances it could be assessed that they may be 10-20% stronger than their ordinary line counterparts, at least at the start of an operation.

17 Edward F Murphy: Dak To: The 173rd Airborne Brigade in South Vietnam's Central Highlands June-November 1967

18 Gordon L Rottman: The US Army in the Vietnam War 1965-73 (Osprey Publishing)

19 Gordon L Rottman: The US Army in the Vietnam War 1965-73 (Osprey Publishing)

Australian Forces

The Australians did not suffer such high casualties as the American and ARVN forces and, although they did occasionally sustain heavy casualties in short time periods, such as the Battle of Long Tan in 1966 and Operation Bribie in February 1967. Generally however they would be much closer to their authorised strength, perhaps 75 - 90%, allowing for soldiers absent on R&R, training courses, sickness etc.

Communist Forces

Although there is no hard data on the strength of Communist units it is likely that they suffered as much as, if not more than their opponents, with regard to field strengths. Unlike their enemies, battle casualty replacements would not simply arrive via truck or helicopter. After Tet in 1968, when the bulk of the VC units were gutted by casualties, most of the replacements came from the PAVN, having travelled down from the North via the Ho Chi Minh trail (which could take up to six months depending on the season and other circumstances). Reinforcements for the PAVN units arrived in the same manner.

The impact of heavy casualties on the VC and PAVN units usually meant that the units would generally need to be withdrawn to rest areas in Laos or Cambodia to rest and refit. If this was not possible, then the units would often hide in remote or inaccessible areas within South Vietnam such as Base Area 611 in the A Chau Valley in western Thua Thien province.

It is considered likely that units would average 60-80% of their authorised strength when fresh, but Allied firepower could reduce this by a considerable margin within a relatively short space of time. A unit that had been in the field for some time would probably have strength closer to 40 -50%. It is probable that, in extremis, heavy weapon or administrative units would be combed out or cannibalised to provide manpower for the line companies in a similar manner to the US and ARVN practice.

The following examples will show how widely the manpower in a unit could vary:

- During the campaign in the Hiep Duc Valley in 1967, the 3rd NVA Regiment (part of the 2nd NVA Division) was assessed to have lost one third of its strength between its arrival in the valley in the spring and the end of summer, during which time it had been engaged by US Marines during Operations Union I and II, and Operation Swift.
- A sister unit of the 3rd NVA Regiment, and also part of the 2nd NVA Division, was the 1st VC Main Force Regiment. It was VC in name only however, and was composed of regular NVA soldiers. In January 1968 the Regiment was assessed by US intelligence to consist of three battalions and six supporting companies, with a strength of 1,700 soldiers. During June 1968, it was reported by a prisoner of war that one of the regiment's battalions, the 60th, had been forced to reorganise into a reinforced company of about 140 men, due to heavy losses during the preceding months.

Appendix 1: Defending the Americal Division

The following is a letter written to the Vietnam Veterans of America, by David W. Taylor of the Americal Army Division Veterans Association. The letter was written in response to an article about Operation Lamar Plain. Having read a number of accounts by veterans of the Americal I have some sympathy with the view that the Division did not perform as badly as is often claimed. I felt that Mr Taylor's letter made some cogent points and was worth including in this Sabre squadron add-on.

Roger Ables' article about Operation Lamar Plain (September/October) covers an important piece of Vietnam War history and should be told in more detail.

However, there was a troubling characterization that disrespects the fighting spirit of the Americal Division. Ables writes: "The U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry Division, the Americal, was responsible for this tactical area of operation, but proved no match for the well prepared, highly motivated and determined enemy."

The 196th Light Infantry Brigade of the Americal, whose area of operation (AO) covered Lamar Plain, had decisively defeated the NVA in a series of operations the prior year, resulting in thousands of enemy dead. It is well known that the Americal's AO was the largest and most diverse in the Vietnam War, from the tripled-canopied jungles of the Annamite Mountains, to the rolling hills of the Piedmont, which offered rapid movement for the enemy, to the mine-infested coastal plains. Each area offered a different threat that was met by the Division.

The heavy fighting west of Tam Ky, which prompted the call for the assistance of the 101st, was brought on by the ease of rapid movement and element of surprise the enemy possessed. Company D of the 1/46th Infantry Battalion and Battery C of the 1/14th Artillery defended LZ Professional against an NVA sapper battalion. The fighting was so fierce that another battery would eventually replace C battery due to casualties. Beyond LZ Professional, Company A and the battalion recon platoon, a total of 91 men, fought a 36-hour battle against the 3rd Battalion of the 3rd NVA Regiment—approximately 300 men. It was this tenacious fighting that kept a foothold for the 101st to move north and west of LZ Professional to engage the enemy.

Closer to Tam Ky, elements of the 3/21st Infantry Battalion stopped the NVA in its surprise attack toward the provincial capital. The 3/21st would eventually receive the Valorous Unit Award for its action in March (Tien Phuoc) and May (Tam Ky). This valorous fighting allowed the 101st to position itself at Tam Ky before moving west to engage the enemy.

During Lamar Plain, the 1/46th was placed under operational control (OPCON) of the 101st, and the 101st was placed under OPCON of the Americal. The 1/501st and 1/502nd Infantry Battalions fought heroically along with their supporting elements and all due credit should be given for their role in breaking the back of the enemy offensive. Yet the third infantry battalion of that operation, the 1/46th, only gets scant mention: "Elements of the 1/46th Infantry suffered casualties south of Hill 376."

While facts in an historical work may not be debatable, the presentation of the facts can certainly be skewed or misleading, and imply that some units were "not up for the match." One does not find this implication in, for example, the First Cavalry Divisions relief of the Marines at Khe Sanh.

The III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) held command responsibility for units in I Corps. Under their command structure, units were pooled on a number of occasions to form reaction forces to take advantage of strategic or tactical opportunities presented when the enemy exposed themselves. In that regard the Americal had provided forces to support the operations of both the 101st and Marine Corps units before and after operation Lamar Plain.

I do not believe it was Mr. Ables' intent to denigrate another Division, but phraseology is important when talking about the sacrifice of soldiers who fought together against a common enemy. The enemy clearly had the upper hand in mid-May 1969 due to the elements of surprise, rapid movement in that terrain, and willingness to take casualties. That dynamic took place numerous times during the Vietnam War where Divisions were aided by other Divisions. And that perspective is important to retain in the story of Lamar Plain.

*David W. Taylor
National Commander
Americal Army Division Veterans Association*

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