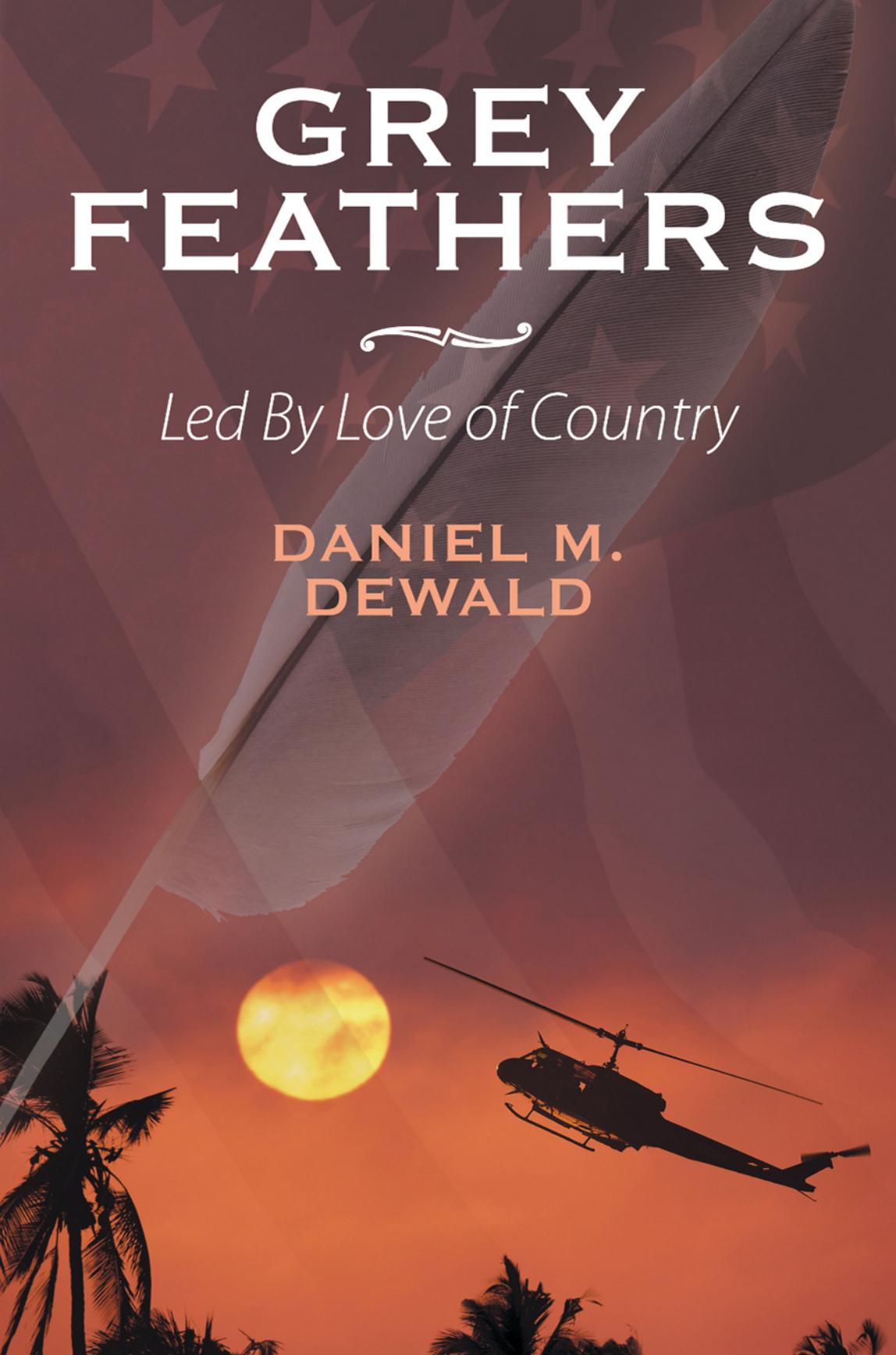


# GREY FEATHERS



*Led By Love of Country*

**DANIEL M.  
DEWALD**



*Grey Feathers*  
*Led by Love of Country*



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By  
*Daniel M. DeWald*



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## *About the Author*

Daniel M. DeWald was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and served in the U.S. Army 4th Infantry Division in the Republic of South Vietnam from August 1969 to August 1970. He had the rank of first lieutenant and served as a combat platoon leader. As a result of the war, he received commendation medals for his activities. He received the Bronze Star Medal with Valor (BSMV) for going above the call of duty when he saved the company commander and four others under hostile fire conditions. He then led a controlled withdrawal from the conflict. He also received the Silver Oak Leaf Cluster for conduct above and beyond the call of duty that occurred under hostile fire during a joint operation with the Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He also received an Air Medal for participating in twenty-five combat assaults. He received the Combat Infantryman's Badge that was earned when he engaged hostile enemy fire. He also received the National Defense Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, and two overseas bars, and he served in a unit (4th Division) that received a unit citation for its service.

Mr. DeWald received his BS degree in business from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, having graduated from ROTC. He also received an MBA from Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. Currently the

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author is a consultant specializing in Materials and MRO management.

His book, *Grey Feathers*, is an accumulation of many letters, newspaper articles, front-line observations, after action reports, and discussions. He currently resides in the Charleston, South Carolina, area with his wife, Sandy. He has three children—Kate, Jon, and Erika—and three grandchildren.

## *Dedication*

To my mother, Mary, and my dad, Paul, who encouraged me to research and provide a story about experiences in the Vietnam War. To my wife, Sandy, who put up with long nights of writing, talking about the war, and bringing up some sad, as well as happy, experiences. To my sister, Nance, who helped me organize and edit my writing.



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## *Preface*

This book is based on after action reports, 4th Division newspaper reports, observations, books, and discussions on the war effort in the years 1967, 1968, and 1969. The men who served in the 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry and 4th Infantry Division served proudly. There were many hardships in those years and horrific combat conditions. The men responded well and with gallantry. They served with honor and integrity. The purpose of this book is to describe combat situations and the response of the 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry soldiers to the adversities.

North and South Vietnam were separated by a demarcation line at about the 17 degree latitude above the equator. It was not a straight line, but for the most part followed the road bed of Highway 102. North Vietnam was bordered by both China and Laos, and South Vietnam by Laos and Cambodia. The infiltration routes were through Laos and Cambodia, as well as by the sea. In addition, there were other insurgents, namely Viet Cong and Montagnards.

The Viet Cong (VC) were guerrilla fighters who were against the South Vietnamese government. They used tactics of hit and run and intimidation. The VC used AK-47 rifles, rifle propelled grenades (RPGs), and mortars (60mm and 82mm) to hit quickly and escape. They would disguise themselves as farm workers, U.S. base workers, retail clerks, truckers, etc., during the day, but be VC commandos at

night. It was almost impossible to distinguish a Viet Cong from a villager unless someone from the village recognized one and let the U.S. soldiers know.

The Montagnards (a specific tribe in the Central Highland region) separated themselves from the population by living in separate villages. They lived in primitive thatched huts on stilts. The men were the providers and excellent hunters. The women took care of their homes, cooked, and cleaned. They would prepare the meals after the hunt was completed. In other words, the tribe lived a simple life away from modern conveniences and communication. They pretended to be neutral in the war. Each village usually had a chief, who everyone looked up to. He was usually the eldest and believed to be the wisest. Like all tribes, they would hunt, farm, and fish for food. Yet, they would also be mischievous and set up booby traps to stop troop movements. The most common booby traps were the spear traps, punji sticks, and animal traps with punji sticks placed at the bottom of a four-foot-deep hole. The VC learned from them and duplicated these traps, plus others. No one knew for sure what side they were on. They appeared peaceful, but actions proved contrary to that. Their weapons were mostly crossbows and spears. Many of the tribes were unfriendly to anyone who would visit them. They did not follow the laws of the South Vietnamese government, as they had their own set of rules to follow. The VC often recruited their tribe members to become insurgents by dragging the young men from their village and then forcing them to go against the West and the South Vietnamese government.

South Vietnam was in the crossroads of a political upheaval. The North Vietnamese were anxious to gain

control of the South. The South had wealth, minerals, oil, and a population that was not afraid to work hard in their fields. The South Vietnamese government would collect taxes on the villagers that most felt to be excessive. The taxes the government collected were used for other things rather than infrastructure, roads, agricultural subsidies, job training programs, and education. The other things were the improvement of the wealth of the government and the wealth of those government officials. The government did not give educators the funds needed to improve the schools. The government was more of a dictatorship without labeling itself as such. The West, however, believed in this government and wanted to stop the insurgency through military means, as well as through civic action programs to “win the hearts and minds of the people.” The goal was to preserve the South Vietnamese government and get a stronger government in place that was not corrupt and was on the side of the people. It was clear that it was a war of communism vs. democracy and that it was important for the United States and its allies to preserve and protect the government as a matter of security and principal.

The state department theorized that a domino effect would occur if the South Vietnamese government fell to the North. Other countries would fall as well and then all of Southeast Asia would become communistic.

President Dwight Eisenhower began assisting the South Vietnamese Army by sending “advisors” from the military in 1955 to train troops and prepare them for the war effort. The advisors were overwhelmed at the task they were given, and in 1962 under President John F. Kennedy, troops were sent in addition to the advisors to help fight the insurgents. This assistance with troops,

advisors, and support lasted until the withdrawal in 1975 under President Gerald Ford.

The United States involvement was to strengthen the Vietnamese Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines and to help the South Vietnamese government be more successful in governing and becoming a democracy. Another reason was to prevent the spread of communism from China. The Chinese were involved also in the training and supplying of weapons to the North Vietnamese. Chinese and, some say, Russian advisors were often placed in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units.

There were many heated battles in the conflict. The military performed as well as it could be expected. The services (army, navy, air force, and marines) were well-coordinated and supported one another. Vietnam was divided into five areas of operations, commonly referred to as Corp areas. The 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry, was in the II Corp area of operations. The jungles were triple canopy and difficult to maneuver. The Delta areas were wide open, and troops walked many hours through rice paddies and streams. Soldiers were given a week's reprieve from the conflict by the offering of rest and recreation trips to Australia, Thailand, Japan, Hawaii, and other places. The more seriously wounded were evacuated to a navy medical ship or to Japan and then on to the United States for further recovery. The tour was for one year of service in country.

I have a great deal of respect for those who served, those who lost their lives, and those who were wounded and are living with the wounds for the rest of their lives. The Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C., is a reminder of the more than fifty-eight thousand lives that were lost in

*Grey Feathers*

the war. Some of those who served were captured and spent time as prisoners of war. This openly displays the sacrifice and the hardships endured. Each one on the wall has a story, but also those who survived the war also have significant stories. All are heroes in my view, and all of them should be recognized as such.

**Daniel DeWald**



## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**

The Vietnam War had not been approved by Congress as a declaration of war. It was referred to as a *police action*. The reason for this action was to stop North Vietnam (considered a communist government) from overthrowing the South Vietnam government. It was believed other countries in Southeast Asia would follow and become communist governments (referred to as the domino effect). A police action, not a war action, would assist the Vietnamese in defending themselves and provide security for the country. A declaration of war would have had to come from Congress, and so the term *war* was not politically used in reference to sending troops to South Vietnam. *Police action* was a term used for an undeclared war. In 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was signed. This doctrine gave President Johnson the authority to conduct combat without a declaration of war. A summary of the resolution is as follows from Wikipedia:

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (officially, the Southeast Asia Resolution, Public Law 88-408) was a joint resolution that the United States Congress

passed on August 7, 1964, in response to a sea battle between the North Vietnamese Navy's Torpedo Squadron 135 (Moise 1996, p. 78) and the destroyer USS Maddox on August 2 and an alleged second naval engagement between North Vietnamese boats and the U.S. destroyers USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy on August 4 in the Tonkin Gulf; both naval actions are known collectively as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. . . . It is of historical significance . . . giving U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson authorization, without a formal declaration of war by Congress, for the use of "conventional" military force in Southeast Asia, and . . . authorized the President to do whatever necessary in order to assist "any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty." This included involving armed forces.

The unanimous affirmative vote in the House of Representatives was 416–0.

This resolution gave the authority for the Lyndon B. Johnson administration to begin its rapid escalation of U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam and to conduct open warfare between North Vietnam and the United States. The number of troops involved in the conflict escalated to more than five hundred thousand troops in country in 1969. President Johnson did not run for a second term in 1968.

## **Division into Corps**

Vietnam was divided into five sections: I Corps was located to the north; II Corps was located in the Central

Highlands; III Corps, Central Delta areas; IV\_Corps in the Delta; and V Corps at the most southwestern part of the country.

Each of these areas had unique developments and was diversified among culture, tribes, villagers, and agriculture. There was little industry at this time in the country. Rice was the main crop in many areas. Bananas, coconuts, fish, and wild game supported the villages as well as chickens, goats, and pigs. Water buffalo were the workhorses for the farmers, as there were few tractors and farm equipment. There were weekly farmer's markets where fresh goods are purchased and sold. Water was a problem in regards to sanitation, as purification was questionable. Troops were supplied with water purification tablets to make the drinking water potable. Sewage systems were primitive or did not exist. The villages had an odor that you never forget. Many villagers' businesses were small stores, restaurants, bars, and general stores. Refrigeration was done in sporadic increments due to the electrical shortages. Electricity would run about four hours a day, and the food would have a period of time in the refrigerator relying on the insulation to keep it cool. Generators provided much of the electricity. Communication was sparse. There were few telephones and no television. Local papers and pamphlets were the means for which information was shared.

The people used scooters, bicycles, and mopeds to travel, with few automobiles and trucks. Commercial trucks were small and resembled the trucks of Japan. They were overhead cabs over a small frame. Gasoline stations were scarce. The roads were narrow and, in many cases, in poor condition. Mines were often in the roads and hindered transportation. Bridges were targets to be

destroyed—both by the U.S. Air Force (and its allies) and the VC—to deter and stop movement. Highways were easy ambush targets, and travelers and convoys often were stopped and harassed. Checkpoints were established by the United States and its allies on the highways to insure travelers had the right papers or documents and were not Viet Cong or NVA.

The Central Highlands were mountainous, with large valleys in between. It was difficult to travel through them. The jungles were full of vegetation and triple canopy trees. Dangers were at every turn. Cobras, bamboo vipers (the deadliest snakes in the region), and many other wildlife inhabited the jungles. The chatter of monkeys could be heard nightly along with many species of insects and birds. Tigers and other carnivorous creatures roamed the countryside. Rats as big as house cats (jungle rats) were prevalent. Of course, it rained often, causing jungle rot on soldiers (large red spots that seeped and covered the legs). To combat the dense vegetation and triple canopy jungle trees, the U.S. government sprayed chemicals from airplanes to deter the growth. This was referred to as Agent Orange. Highway 19 was the main artery of east–west travel from the Gulf of Tonkin (Que Nhon City) to Pleiku City and beyond to the Cambodian border in II Corp. In certain areas, elephants were used as a method of transportation.

Each village had its local provincial government. It would collect taxes, provide city services, and be a contact point for the national government. It would set the local laws and enforce them. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) would draft villagers by day to replenish its troops. At night, the Viet Cong did the same thing, only much more forcibly. (Firsthand discussions with villagers

confirmed that the VC would force at gunpoint young sons of the village to become recruits.)

## **Dissatisfaction with the War Effort**

The draft was one way the U.S. troops were replenished. As more troops were needed, the draft increased the numbers. This was very unpopular and contributed to a growing dissent of the war. Demonstrations against the war were increasing in number. Our government believed that more troops were needed to combat the strengthening enemy forces. A troop surge was requested by the military, and more than five hundred thousand troops were sent during this period to stop the insurgency. Many of us had the idealism to believe that the government was doing the right thing in a country far from home and there was a duty to serve. However, citizens were not rationed, nor were citizens expected to sacrifice for the war effort. A conflict arose between the doves and the hawks in Congress, causing bitterness and unresolved differences. The war effort, though, was bipartisan—starting under a Democratic president (John F. Kennedy) and ending under a Republican president (Gerald Ford). Four presidents presided during this war. President Eisenhower only presided over advisors and was not a part of the war effort.

The anti-war effort began with persons outside of the mainstream. They were the hippies, the out of work, the unemployables, students, and liberal academic teachers and professors. On the college campuses, the nickname for the student protestors were green baggers, named for the green backpacks they usually carried. At first the demonstrations were in smaller groups with homemade signs. It was truly a grassroots movement. Yet as the war continued, more

people joined from the mainstream, asking Congress to end the war.

The military leaders used military tactics and strategies. Their recommendation was always to conduct a war and to win. I was one to support the military and believed that this was a stand to support democracy and stop the communist movement. I joined the military despite all the fanfare against the war. Those of us who joined, whether voluntarily or due to being drafted, put politics and our own desires aside to support the military and the war effort.

### **All of Us Are Grey Feathers**

A *grey feather* is an Indian term. The braves were given colored feathers for every feat that they accomplished as they were growing up in the tribe. The grey feather indicated the first step in being a young brave. It was the first mark of distinction and showed that they were selected to represent the tribe in warfare, hunting, and fishing. Everyone was the same rank as another. They were sworn to protect one another and the tribe.

This philosophy of the American Indian followed into the Vietnam War. All were braves sworn to uphold the Constitution and to serve and protect. It was an unwritten rule to watch one another's backs and to work as a unit when engaged with an enemy force. The bravery and determination shown by all soldiers fighting in the war was led by love of country and by all of us wanting to become the best of the best and beat the enemy. It was a drive that most followed while serving in the Army. All of us earned the grey feather for completion of our service in that country.

The draft served as a recruiting tool. The attitude was our own. Even those drafted developed the attitude to succeed and become good soldiers. It wasn't what anyone wanted to do, but it was a duty to do. There was as much diversity in our ranks as there were soldiers. Some did not have formal education. Others had graduated from college. Still others came from business. There were myriad reasons to join.

Those who did not choose to serve had deferments available to them—marriage, higher education, defense work, hardship, etc. However, the military was also an option to them, and some decided to forgo the deferment and join. It was a duty, some said, and for others it was an obligation to serve the country. They were Americans first and felt the need to serve. This created a unique mix of people in all of the services. It produced a camaraderie that few understood and created a feeling of belonging. It was a “watch my back and I will watch yours” philosophy.

### **3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division**

During the period of 1967 through 1970, the 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division fought gallantly against a hostile force that for the most part was heavily armed and well organized to fight against South Vietnam and its allies (the United States and the West). The troops were supported by roads that could handle heavy equipment. They had no significant air power available to them. In this period, an average of 80 to 120 United States soldiers per week lost their lives in various areas of the countryside. Fighting did not happen every day, but patrols were ongoing. This was the beginning of the grey feather tradition. The synopsis of the actions directly affected the

overall feeling of common goals and fostered the feeling of all helping one another. Through the common associations in the realm of fire, each soldier earned the grey feather.

This story describes the events in II Corps, where 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry, had its operations. II Corps was a mountainous area with many hills and mountains. Hills were usually named by the meters above sea level. The range of height of the hills and mountains were from five hundred meters above sea level to more than two thousand meters. The valleys were used for planting rice and other crops as well as harboring water buffalo and farm animals. There often was a mist surrounding the mountains in the morning as well as fog. Monsoons were heaviest in the summer. Once in a while, storms caused from typhoons would play havoc with the troops. The rains were extremely heavy, and mudslides did occur. Resupply efforts were often cancelled until a later date due to the fog and poor visibility.

The language barrier hindered communication between the U.S. troops and the local villagers, preventing information from being shared. However, pictures were drawn, and the villagers were as helpful as they could be under the circumstances.

From all of this, the troops would arrive in Vietnam by air into an air base near Bien Hoa, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Hue, or Cam Ran Bay. The air bases were staging areas where troops would get their clothing, weapons, and supplies in preparation for movement to their duty base camp. There was an orientation for all troops that covered what to expect, reviewed first aid, and offered strategic discussions. The grey feather was not earned here.

After two days, the troops were moved by Caribous or C130s to the air bases in their area. It was not easy to leave wives, girlfriends, friends, family, work, and the “world as

they knew it.” The only news was in a paper called the *Stars and Stripes* or the magazine *Espirit* and that was mostly about the war efforts. Music was by tape and played at the base camps. Radio programs were scripted and taped. Few soldiers had access, but when they did, they listened to it. The radio programs would always greet the troops with “Good morning, Vietnam.” It sounded strange, but was well received. Yet for the most part, the world events and events within the United States were unknown. We were living in a vacuum of news and sometimes of our families. The mail was free for soldiers to send to the United States, but slow. Telephone lines to the rest of the world were scarce, and the wait was long. At times, packages were sent to the troops, and these were shared by all. It was greatly appreciated.

The travel from Bien Hoa to the II Corps base camp was a world apart. Bien Hoa was in a relatively safe area where there were few instances of insurgency. II Corps had many sightings that included both North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong. NVA soldiers were units of the North Vietnamese Army that infiltrated the country by way of Cambodia and Laos, by ocean, and by the roads going through the country. The Viet Cong were insurgents who lived in the villages and acted as soldiers for the VC at night. They disliked the South Vietnam government and their policies, and they even had some disdain for the country’s religions. They did not like foreign intervention, and they had little respect for the local governments and leaders. They were true guerrilla fighters and would engage and withdraw without detection. To counteract the VC and the NVA, the South Vietnamese formed ARVN regiments, which often operated independently and had their own objectives. U.S. advisors would be in the units to help them develop combat tactics and use weapons

properly and to assist in getting them stronger. They were part of MAC-V (Military Army Command Vietnam) and placed in the II Corp as well. Special Forces units were stationed on outlying areas to provide reconnaissance and first response if needed. In addition, there were many support elements—helicopter pilots and warrant officers, supply personnel, quartermaster areas, transportation hubs, medical facilities, mess tents and cooks, administration areas, mortar platoons, artillery regiments, air force bases, naval weapons areas, signal corps individuals, combat engineering troops, etc. Danger was at every point. Women served as nurses, Red Cross workers, and administrators during the conflict. They, too, had a large part that was important to the operation. All of these served with the highest recognition.

While the size of units is classified, it is important to give a perspective as to approximate sizes of force. A squad is usually four to eight men, plus a squad leader. A platoon ranges from twenty to thirty in the field, but often has fewer soldiers under combat conditions. There are usually four platoons plus a mortar unit in a company. An artillery unit may also be attached to a battalion. There are usually four to five companies plus a headquarters company to make up a battalion. There may also be battalion trains areas with additional personnel. In the field, companies may average one hundred men and battalions about eight hundred. On the enemy side, a company-size force is about a hundred men. A regiment-size force is about five hundred. A division size is about five thousand. Different conflicts will drastically change these numbers. They do give a point of reference to help better understand the actions and confrontations.

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