



CAVALRY

Attitudes to the use of armour in Vietnam

Essentially, all the combatants in the Vietnam War, who used armour, except perhaps the ARVN, did so reluctantly. It simply did not fit the viewpoint present in any of the high commands as to what sort of war Vietnam was perceived as.

This attitude though, was one which was to persist for many years, until the armour enthusiasts had finally proven their detractors wrong. Indeed, by 1969, after the Tet Offensive of 1968, General Westmoreland had been so turned around by the successes enjoyed by the armoured units during the defeat of that offensive that he requested that all future reinforcements be armoured, rather than infantry.

The role of Armour in Vietnam

Armour has many roles in normal warfare. These range from seizing ground, shocking the enemy command and control structure, supporting infantry, destroying enemy AFV's and through to finally counter-attacking enemy attacks. In counter-insurgency warfare and in Vietnam in particular it was found that those roles expanded considerably to include such tasks as convoy protection, asset protection and other internal security tasks.

It was though, the ability of armoured units to bring to bear relatively large, massive amounts of fairly discriminatory firepower that was extremely mobile, was the major reason why all participants in the war turned to its use. Reading through any battle history of the war one comes across accounts time and time again of where armoured units were able to basically decimate their opponents because of the amount of firepower they were able to bring to bear quickly against them whilst being protected by their own armour plating.

The US Army, in particular had a long history in WWII and Korea of the aggressive use of armour and this carried over to Vietnam where by its ability to force the pace and outmanoeuvre the enemy units were of considerable value. However, as Starry points out, whereas in previous wars armoured units had been used as the forces which probed and outflanked the enemy, in Vietnam, "armour was used as a fixing force," essentially engaging the enemy and bringing him to battle, "while airmobile infantry became the encircling manoeuvre element."

Whereas the French, in the previous Indochina war, against the communist Viet Minh had suffered severe casualties within their armoured units whenever they had been ambushed, the US and allied forces found that usually, "the armoured force, led by tanks, had sufficient combat power to withstand the massed ambush until supporting artillery, air, and infantry could be brought in to destroy the enemy." So throughout the war, engagements for armoured forces usually took place with the armour forcing or creating the fight, often through invasion of the enemy's "safe areas" and infantry being used to reinforce or encircle were typical.

Perhaps the only real success for armour from the outset amongst the Americans and ARVN was the way in which mounted combat came to the fore for infantry in the form of the ACAV (Armoured Cavalry Assault Vehicle). Until Vietnam, the US Army's doctrine had been that infantry units should dismount before assaulting an enemy position. However, as the ARVN discovered, this meant that when facing the massive amounts of firepower that the NLF or VPA could bring to bear during a firefight, the infantry was exposed to needless casualties, as well as losing the momentum of the attack. Indeed it was the ARVN which pioneered the use of mounted tactics from APC's when they first deployed the M113 in 1962. They were also the first to discover the need for increased firepower on the vehicle by mounting an extra .30 Cal. MMG beside the commander, fired by an exposed prone soldier lying on the roof of the vehicle. Perhaps more importantly, they also discovered the vulnerability of the exposed track commander when manning the pintle mounted .50 Cal. HMG during the battle of Ap Bac where 14 out of 17 commanders became casualties.

The US Cavalry units, perhaps smarting under the loss of their beloved tanks, took to the idea and improved upon it by creating the ACAV. They added armour around the commander and a gun shield for the .50 Cal., provided two extra M60 GPMG's each athwart the roof hatch (protected by shields) and installed an M79 Grenadier inside the troop compartment, firing through the roof hatch to provide close support. The result was a vehicle which was able to go where tanks weren't, by virtue of its lighter weight and ground pressure, packed considerable firepower and was agile and reasonably well armoured. The result, when coupled with the aggressive leadership and tactics of the US Cavalry's commanders was highly effective by all accounts.

