in Vietnam. Certainly it would be difficult to get Congress to vote additional aid for the South Vietnamese. So there was very little intelligence reporting on corruption among the South Vietnamese generals.

'It meant that we ignored the rot that was destroying the country's will and capacity to fight – because as the generals siphoned off the aid money we were directing to the government, the foot soldier on the ground suffered.' Snepp asserts that the ARVN did not get enough ammunition or hand-grenades because of the corruption and that this was known: 'It was one of the most cynical acts on our part to disregard [such] important intelligence.'

One quarter of a million South Vietnamese soldiers gave their lives in combat. But as the GIs rotated, the newcomers could see only the consequence, not the cause, of the overall malaise. In 1967 the US military evaluated ARVN performance as 'eighty per cent ineffective'. Its operations were bitterly known as 'Search and Avoid.' US combat deaths increased with ARVN's demise. In 1967, more than 16,000 Americans were killed in Vietnam, triple the 1965 figure which was triple that of all the previous years. The toll would keep rising. Each year there would be new Americans to decide what color the lights of Saigon's fountains should be and each year feelings would darken towards an ally these foreign troops could neither comprehend nor fully command. No solution appeared, except General Westmoreland's 'More'.

Westmoreland's solution was one of attrition; the greater the fire-power, the quicker the end, it was assumed. But the Vietnamese had been fighting for a lifetime: they had adapted to war in all its forms, as soldier-author Tim O'Brien would discover. He had a personal valet, a boy who had latched on to him at the camp: 'I called him Champion. A nice kid who would give me a back rub after a hard day on the march, who would clean my rifle for me. This little kid seven years old knew how to take an M-16 apart. I didn't.' There seemed to be a message in that.

10

'And throughout the war we never lost a battle.'
– General William Westmoreland

Westy's War

At 10,000 feet aboard his command plane General William Westmoreland was once again conducting an aerial survey of the battlefield. It was his custom to invite one or two reporters 'selected' by his press officer and it was a popular invitation if only because of Westy's self-admitted 'penchant for acronyms and catch phrases' which extended to his oddly named personal aircraft. It was a converted C-123 cargo plane with a big white-painted belly and Westmoreland called it the *White Whale*. For several months before assuming command Westmoreland had taken the *White Whale* over every part of South Vietnam for a first-hand reconnaissance, while educating the press on the terrain and the difficulties. Westmoreland, as he wrote in *A Soldier Reports*, wanted to improve the 'deplorable' relations arising from the military's 'overly optimistic' progress reports, and 'in those early days the newsmen were sometimes closer to the truth than were American officials'. In particular, he wanted to dispel any public illusions about a quick and easy end to the war: American 'impatience', he foresaw, could defeat him. Forty per cent of the interior was uninhabitable jungle, swamp and scrubland – or elephant grass 'ideal for nourishing' guerrilla warfare; the enemy had to be 'found and fought' there: the American tactic must be to 'search and destroy'. The US Commander was frank but confident flying over the narrow, variable land which for twenty centuries had been the graveyard of foreign armies.

Though some reporters thought of the two Vietnams as shaped like an hourglass with the top half filtering remorselessly into the bottom, Westmoreland preferred the image of the Vietnamese peasant's carefully balanced pannier. The two weighted baskets represented the heavily populated deltas of the Red River in the North and the Mekong in the South, and the long bamboo shoulder pole was the politically pliant Laos-Cambodian border. This was where Communist troops and supplies were actually filtering in along a thousand kilometers of mountain trails. This, effectively, was the Western front – a longer one, Westmoreland would point out, than in World War I, and the solution had to be the same as in that war: attrition. Westmoreland believed that his enemy was also greatly extended and vulnerable – or would be if denied the succor of the populated areas. Having so often pointed out the problems, Westmoreland could now finally demonstrate some answers.

The time was the end of August 1965, just one month after President Johnson's commitment of 125,000 American combat troops. A battalion of Marines had secured the landing beaches at Qui Nhon. An entire division – America's newly devised airmobile division – was approaching at sea. From this midway point of South Vietnam, the coastal flats curved north towards the Marine enclave at Chu Lai, where a week earlier a threatened guerrilla siege had been dramatically broken. To the West lay the Central Highlands, where the February attacks on the plateau cities of Kontum and Pleiku, positioned like eyes overlooking the six largest provinces, had led to the US air and land intervention. Beyond, where the mountainous jungles of the Cambodian border descended to the great Ia Drang valley, three North Vietnamese divisions were reported probing toward Pleiku, but Westmoreland was now confident that he had the manpower and mobility for a counter-offensive.

At Chu Lai, Marine reinforcements had immediately engaged in a major battle which Westmoreland called 'an auspicious beginning for American arms'. Suspecting a sizeable guerrilla attack, Marine commander Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt had deployed a battalion by helicopter to 'pin the VC' against the shore and had then re-embarked another, newly arrived battalion to attack from the sea. Amphibious tanks were sent in; a navy cruiser 'delivered devastating fire' from six-inch guns, while fighter-bombers pounded and napalmed a complex of guerrilla tunnels and caves. After three days, with Marine 'KIA's' (Killed in Action) put at forty-five, an enemy 'body-count' of 688 was reported, plus 'an undetermined number of persons caught in these caves as indicated by the odor pervading the area'. The impromptu American-only attack, the first regimental-sized US battle since the Korean war, was viewed as an illuminating combination of mobility and fire-power and was thereupon called Operation Starlight. Now, on the coast at Qui Nhon, the 1st Cavalry Division was coming ashore. The 'Cav' came with a fearsome reputation earned in the Pacific war and in Korea, and with a new and potentially deadly punch. The Division and all its support mechanism had been remodeled for total rapid helicopter deployment, though as Westmoreland noted 'the concept was still to be tried under fire'. But within hours of its landing the Division had vaulted on hundreds of Hueys to a new base deep in the Central Highlands protecting Pleiku. To the press it seemed that in just a few days Westmoreland had demonstrated his equation: mobility + fire-power = attrition.

Operation Starlight was quickly followed by Silver Bayonet as the 1st Cavalry Division was pitted against North Vietnamese main force units in the Ia Drang Valley, with '1771 known enemy casualties'. But the month-long battle, though co-ordinating the first use of B-52 bombers in Vietnam, saw fighting – in Westmoreland's words – 'as fierce as any ever experienced by

American troops'. US combat losses of 300 were almost twice the ratio of the counter-guerrilla Chu Lai action.

In a critique after the Ia Drang battle the senior officer pointedly held up a new, lightweight, fully automatic rifle and said, 'Brave soldiers and the M-16 brought this victory.' The M-16 was still considered unreliable compared to the equivalent Communist AK-47, yet the majority of American troops were then equipped only with the older and heavier semi-automatic M-14 – and for fully two years there would not be enough M-16s to go round. At the start, at the most basic level, Communist fire-power was in fact superior, and the other part of Westmoreland's equation, mobility, would throughout prove only of moment to moment advantage in terrain that could be constantly swept but seldom held.

But in the Fall euphoria of 1965, before Communist infiltration escalated in response, there was a dramatic about-turn in the US military evaluation. Instead of the Communist victory once predicted for the end of 1965, or the countrywide 'collapse' envisaged only weeks earlier, the war was now not only winnable but a victory date was anticipated. Westmoreland, however, was still concerned that Washington might miscalculate the cost. He was nervous about an 'incredible' conversation – recorded in his memoirs – in which his predecessor, General Paul Harkins, had been asked by Defense Secretary McNamara, '"Paul, how long will it take to pacify this country?" General Harkins replied, "Mr Secretary, I believe we can do it in six months. If I am given command of the Vietnamese, we can reverse this thing immediately."'

On taking over the command, Westmoreland was reassured by the Defense Secretary that the resources of the United States were at his disposal. Though the American public knew nothing of this arrangement, Westmoreland says in the interview for this history that 'I was told by Mr McNamara on innumerable occasions that I should ask for the troops I felt needed to bring about the end result. I should not worry about public opinion. I should not worry about the economy. I should not even concern myself as to the availability of the troops. His direction to me was to ask for the resources I needed to carry out a military mission.'

Westmoreland records that he and McNamara had agreed during the summer to seventy-one battalions – or twice the number of troops which President Johnson had just announced as the force to be dispatched. Now, as the year ended with 180,000 troops in place or en route, Westmoreland was preparing personally to confront the President and the Defense Secretary with a request for a 1966 force level of 102 battalions – twenty-three of them to be drawn from five Allied nations, including Australia and New Zealand, which were assumed to be readily supportive. Westmoreland was asking for 429,000 American troops by the end of 1966.

On the assumption that he had 'unrestricted use of American troops' Westmoreland had prepared a tactical timetable for victory. He believed that the first large contingent of US forces would serve to halt both 'the swift disintegration' of the ARVN, and the Communist advance. He would have time to build a logistical base for an enlarged force and this phase would take to the end of 1965. In the second phase he would search out his enemy and destroy it in the jungle while the ARVN engaged in counter-insurgency in the villages, pacifying the countryside and winning hearts and minds. This two-fisted offensive – striking out with one hand at the Communist main forces while keeping a grip on the populace with the other – was to be applied with maximum force by mid-1966. The combination of fire-power and pacification would force the North Vietnamese to contemplate open battle or withdraw. If enemy infiltration persisted, then coupled with the bombing of the North a further eighteen months would be required for the destruction of Communist base areas – given the resources to do it. Following this third phase US forces would start withdrawing.

Whereas his predecessor had predicted victory in six months, Westmoreland was conditionally projecting it within two years, or by the end of 1967. He would later insist that he made no specific promises and that planning was predicated on there being no 'restraints', specifically that he would be permitted to attack Communist border 'sanctuaries' inside Laos and Cambodia. Pentagon records show that McNamara informed President Johnson, 'The course of action recommended stands a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time.' With this timetable Johnson agreed to the increased combat commitment without setting any ceiling on troop levels. The timetable apparently did not project how many US troops might be needed should Communist troop levels also rise.

Westmoreland says however that he knew the Communists were preparing to escalate the war. The US Commander had diligently studied Communist war methodology in Asia. Westmoreland's timetable was a counter to Mao Tse-tung's own classic three-phase strategy: 1. to base in distant inaccessible terrain; 2. to merge with and command the local population; 3. conventional warfare when the time was right. 'Everything indicated – the evidence was totally convincing', says Westmoreland, 'that the North Vietnamese were on the verge of phase three: to move into conventional war, which is subsequently what they did. There were battalion, regimental, even division-sized units coming down from the North.'

But despite this knowledge the US Command felt that it had the situation in hand as 1966 began. In the largest yet 'Search and Destroy' mission, the Marines and the 1st Cavalry linked up after a North-South sweep on the central province of Binh Dinh. The awkward moment came at the start of what was called Operation Masher. President Johnson, seldom cautious with his epithets, 'objected' that Masher was a bit much. Two angelic words were added and when Operation Masher/White Wing was over Westmoreland's MACV command reported a 'body-count' of 2389. His phase two tactic of massive attrition was now well-advanced. The new 'big unit' campaign was beginning to look invincible, and for once the military had few vociferous

critics. As America's first combat year ended General Westmoreland was *Time* magazine's Man of the Year.

William Childs Westmoreland – 'Westy' to his friends and to his men – was First Captain of his West Point class of 1936. At graduation he ranked 112 out of 276 in overall academic studies but was eighth in tactics. He was considered 'born to be a general'; certainly he grew up with an acute sense of American military history. His family had served in the Civil War and still tended to fight it. He records in his memoirs that when he told a great-uncle who was a die-hard Confederate that he was attending the same school that 'Grant and Sherman went to' there was a long silence, then: 'All right, son – Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson went there, too.' Westy's campaigns began as an artillery officer in North Africa, then Sicily, then the Utah Beach in Normandy in 1944. With the rank of Colonel he was Chief of Staff of the 9th Infantry Division in Germany until 1945; then Brigadier-General commanding the 187th Airborne Regiment in Korea 1952-53. At the age of fifty-one, his all-round experience led to four-stars and Vietnam in 1964.

For Westmoreland soldiering meant a textbook loyalty and code. One of his first directives in Vietnam was that every soldier should carry at all times written rules of conduct towards civilians, yet his critics would say his tactics brought horrendous civilian suffering. Westmoreland, though in uniform for almost thirty years when he went to Vietnam, was no military crusader. He appeared sceptical of the political rhetoric of policing the world, even doubtful of the specific cause. He wrote that during the political chaos in South Vietnam 'between 1963 and 1965 . . . the United States could have severed its commitment with justification and honor, though not without strong political reaction at home'. Yet given the assignment, only tradition prevailed: 'A soldier', he says, 'must be prepared to cope with the hardships of war and bear its scars.' He had known the most famous American generals of the era – Pershing, Patton, Eisenhower, Stilwell, MacArthur – and now their sons and grandsons were serving under him in Vietnam. He was the inheritor; he carried the baton, and Lyndon Johnson would describe his mission as 'the most complex war in all American history'.

With his assignment Westmoreland had sought out General Douglas MacArthur and the 'old soldier' had told him: 'Do not overlook the possibility that in order to defeat the guerrilla you may have to resort to a scorched earth policy'. MacArthur urged him always to have 'plenty of artillery, for the Oriental greatly fears artillery'.

Westmoreland recalls getting a quite different reading from the outgoing US Commander in Vietnam, General Harkins, who veering from optimism to pessimism would 'constantly' quote a version of Kipling:

> The end of the fight is a tombstone white,
> With the name of the late deceased.
> And the epitaph drear, a fool lies here
> Who tried to hustle the East.

'I'm very fond of Kipling because he's a soldier's poet,' says Westmoreland, but he confesses, 'I didn't take it quite to heart.' After all, neither Kipling nor even MacArthur – no one in the history of war – had ever known the mobility and fire-power that Westmoreland now had.

'The most spectacular development', he considers, 'was the coming of age of the helicopters. It saved innumerable lives through air evacuation. It gave us a battlefield mobility that we never dreamed of years previously.' With the helicopter – and MacArthur's advice in mind – Westmoreland devised a system of hilltop artillery fortifications called firebases, positioned in remote areas and supplied by air. From these, forward infantry patrols – protected by the artillery – would act as bait, seeking contact with the enemy, then calling in the helicopter 'Search and Destroy' battalions. The firebases, says Westmoreland, were 'designed to channel the enemy into well-defined corridors where we might bring air and artillery to bear and then hit him with mobile ground forces'.

By early 1966 the war had taken strange new forms and a new language which tended to camouflage the grim business of attrition. The 'Daisy-Cutter' – a 15,000 lb monster bomb – would blow a hole on a hilltop 300 feet in diameter or 'the size of the Rosebowl' to create an instant firebase. 'Jolly Green Giants' – Sikorsky helicopters – would ferry in huge 105mm howitzers and this artillery would glint in star formation from the heart of the jungle, thundering in every direction. American forces and imagery rapidly pervaded every area and aspect of the country as Westmoreland built his logistical base. The 'Big Red One' or 1st Infantry Division and 'Tropic Lightning' or the 25th Infantry now formed a 'donut' defense for thirty miles around Saigon. The 'Ivy' or 4th Infantry had joined the 'Cav' in the Central Highlands and the Marines (who preferred to be called just that) were on SOS – 'Strongpoint Obstacle System' or firebases – with South Korean 'Tiger' and 'White Horse' brigades helping seal the coastline.

Westmoreland still felt a general concern about the ARVN, now largely confined to village defense in populated areas, and he expressed particular disbelief when told that one South Vietnamese divisional commander would only contemplate battle if so advised by his astrologer, but the US military found comfort in its catalogue of fire-power. Very soon 'Riverine' gunboats were sweeping the Delta; squadrons of giant 'Rome' plows, looking like a centurion's prong, were trying piecemeal to bulldoze the jungle; 'Agent Orange' defoliants were burning off the foliage; 'People Sniffers' or electronic sensors shaped like small trees were strewn over the forests to transmit sounds of men or vehicles, while 'Huey' platoons vaulted from sighting to sighting supported by the new 'Cobras' of the jungle – helicopter gunships with nose-painted fangs. At night there was 'Spooky', a prop-plane carrying enough flares to floodlight a mile radius while firing 6000 rounds a minute and also known as 'Puff, the Magic Dragon'.

But there was the dilemma over much of the rural area of how to direct all this fire-power. Some districts with villages known to be under guerrilla control were declared 'Free Fire Zones' in which anyone could be shot. Villages suspected of aiding the enemy could be ordered destroyed by the search commander. By now the sweep operations, and the difficulty of distinguishing between the guerrilla and the black-clad villager, were producing quite different casualties. In a follow-up to Operation Masher/White Wing in the densely populated coastal region of Binh Dinh, the US military summarized the fire-power deployed. B-52 strikes coupled with a staggering 1126 fighter-bomber sorties unloaded 1.5 million pounds of bombs, and 292,000 pounds of napalm. From offshore, navy gunships offered support. The operation left 1884 refugees. An additional 10,779 had been previously evacuated from areas under guerrilla control. By 1967 Communist captives numbered 17,000. But by then civilian refugees had reached 1.2 million. 'Search and Destroy' was earning the acronym SAD.

'It was an unfortunate choice of words,' says one of its architects, General William DePuy. 'What it meant back in 1965, long before it became unpopular, was simply that US units or Vietnamese airborne units and marine units would patrol in the jungle – not in the populated areas – to search for the main force Communist units, fight them and destroy them.' But as the war enlarged and enveloped South Vietnam's 16,000 villages the tactic 'became associated with pictures of troops searching villages and setting them on fire. The word "destroy" became a dirty word. It started out with the best of intentions.'

General Westmoreland would admit to being warned that in the television age he was his 'own worst enemy' in using the discredited phrase. The times dictated that generals, much like politicians, be media-conscious, but Westmoreland no longer considered the press 'closer to the truth'. In an article entitled 'A Military War of Attrition' he charged that 'a few graphic newspaper photographs and TV shots of American troops setting fire to thatched-roof huts were enough to convince many that "search and destroy" operations were laying waste to the land.' He says the operations were 'directed primarily against military installations – bunkers, tunnels, rice and ammunition caches, and training camps'.

To Westmoreland – believing that he had adhered to General MacArthur's guideline that the military code 'has come down to us from even before the age of knighthood and chivalry' – the criticism was unjust. 'Search and Destroy' was only the tactical element of the 'hearts and minds' strategy. The countryside could not be pacified until it was cleared, and 'the people living in those [burned] villages were humanely relocated'. Speaking with the gravity of a man taking an oath, he says: 'As one who has fought in three wars, I can say categorically that never in the history of warfare, certainly never in the history of American arms, has more attention been given to the avoidance of civilian casualties than we did in Vietnam.'

But between principle and practice lay the different perspective of the High Command and the foot soldier. Hardly any of the veterans interviewed for this history expressed any great concern for civilians in combat situations – if only because they were never certain who among the people were friends or foes. Frustration, fear and moment to moment concern for survival outweighed all else, and an alien land and culture completed what Captain Brian Jenkins remembers as 'the Fort Apache mentality' among American combat troops. In a fairly typical comment he says that for the GI 'going outside of his military base, wherever it was, was going into Indian country, and the safety catch comes off the rifle and there was a great willingness to react with force'.

Modern revolutionary war was not within MacArthur's experience: it did not allow for chivalry or even much compassion. 'It was, in essence, a war of attrition,' wrote Westmoreland, and '. . . there was no alternative to "search and destroy" operations.' Yet the paradox was more glaring with each operation. By 1968 the effort to secure the people had resulted in no less than one third of the population being uprooted from their ruined or abandoned ancestral villages: this was the number who had been 'relocated' apart from the wandering refugees. There was the question of how 'humane' this could possibly be, and anyhow the cost could only be acceptable if the strategy could also be measured. That became the larger question.

In his subsequent study of attrition, Westmoreland wrote that as a strategy it had been in 'disrepute' since the battles of the Somme and Verdun and it 'appeared particularly unsuited for a war in Asia with Asia's legendary hordes of manpower. Yet if one carefully re-examines the strategy of attrition in World War I, one must admit that, for all the horrendous cost, it eventually worked. Furthermore, the war in Vietnam was not against Asian hordes but instead against an enemy with relatively limited manpower.' In fact, year by year, North Vietnam would closely match American troop deployment until the US tired. World War I, of course, had clear-cut cause: Europe was integral to America's identity, the source of its sons and its first line of defense. More specifically, it was a war fought for territory: the horrendous could be measured; the dead could be tallied. Military historians may judge that in Vietnam US mobility and fire-power deployed at random – 'search and destroy' rather than seize and hold – produced only the illusion of progress. If so, then the miscalculations appear to persist.

'Victory', says General William DePuy, 'goes to the side that is able to concentrate its forces at a critical place at a critical time on the battlefield.' He can therefore argue that America was militarily victorious in Vietnam, though from Hanoi's point of view it was the long-term political strategy and not military tactics that would decide the war. DePuy, a senior deputy to Westmoreland, had a large role in the early planning of 'Search and Destroy'. Known as a skilled commander, he would lead some of the largest offensive operations of the war. He gives a concise picture of how the opposing forces maneuvered. The cardinal principle of the guerrillas was never to attack unless able to concentrate superior force, and in choosing when to attack towns and communications the guerrilla 'has all the advantage', but DePuy says that helicopter mobility 'went a long way toward turning that around'.

'We were able', he says, 'to put very small units, platoons and companies, sometimes smaller patrols, out into the jungle to find and fight. And then from the first shot and every minute thereafter the advantage turned in our favor, because the Viet Cong or the NVA were seldom able to reinforce. They started the battle with whatever they had. But every minute we would be able to bring in fighters, attack helicopters, artillery and then additional troops by helicopter. So it reversed what was an exclusive advantage to the guerrilla, and when used well it resulted in frustration for the guerrilla and victory for our own army.

'There were many occasions where we were able to bring in – in the course of a short battle, and most battles were short: maybe an hour or so – two or three battalions. In addition to all the air force fighters and the artillery and the attack helicopters.'

The GI patrols, or 'Grunts', provide a less enthused description. The VC or 'Charlie' knew American tactics well enough never to stay and fight unless trapped. He had no territory to defend, no fixed base; Charlie could float – he was nicknamed 'ghost' – and at night would strike at the firebases where often the Grunts on guard would mutter, 'The ghosts are out there – the ghosts are coming.' On patrol, the GIs were inviting certain ambush beyond the range of the firebase artillery. The guerrillas would recede then advance, biding their time while the patrols searched and searched.

Major Joe Anderson was an exception in Vietnam: he served two years. In 1966, on his first duty tour, he commanded a platoon of the elite 1st Cavalry. 'We very seldom knew', he says, 'exactly where the enemy was and so it was almost always a case of us stumbling on to them and then perhaps following up with a major operation – an immediate reaction force.' That, he agrees, 'was the great value of the helicopter'. But it was a strict gamble as to which side got mauled, recalls Lieutenant Jim Webb.

The Marine officer – and future author on Vietnam – led numerous patrols, called 'dangling the bait'. 'We had our mission – a sort of military mission – saturation patrolling. We would dive into an area, set up as a company, and platoons would patrol out from the company operation base, hoping to make contact. It was almost like seducing the enemy into making contact with you. Then you could fix the position and bring in other units and supporting arms – and destroy, which is very nice when you start tallying numbers on a tote board but which can be really devastating for the smaller units.'

The guerrillas simply avoided patrols operating within the safety perimeter of the firebase, and deep patrols of company size could never be sure of what they would encounter. Major Anderson remembers when one company 'happened to land in the midst of a North Vietnamese battalion' and 'when the Americans unloaded from the helicopters, they were destroyed: twenty-two out of twenty-seven were killed on the spot'. The survivors radioed their position and Anderson's company '*moved through the rest of the day into the night to reach them* [author's italics]'. A major engagement developed. 'We looked on it as a victory,' says Anderson, 'but it was a very tragic loss for the platoon that we went to rescue.'

As Anderson would say later, 'Looking for all the support we could get, there was never too much fire-power.' But for the forward patrols – essential to 'Search and Destroy' – fire-power could only save them, not shield them. A large factor in this in-and-out tactic was the assumption that mobility would minimize American casualties. However, a careful study of the statistics shows that before any decisive fire-power and Medevac helicopters could be called in, US forces paid a higher price in Vietnam. Ambush and face to face combat involving primitive weapons and small arms caused half the American deaths in Vietnam compared to one third in World War II and Korea. (In Vietnam, however, the US survival rate for the seriously wounded was the highest of any modern war due to helicopter evacuation and advanced medical facilities, which included portable field hospitals. In Vietnam, eighty-two per cent of the seriously wounded were saved, compared to seventy-one per cent in World War II and seventy-four per cent in Korea. On the other hand, the US suffered in Vietnam, largely from ambush, some 10,000 amputees – more than in World War I and Korea combined for American forces.)

Crude but deadly hand-made weapons used as booby-traps often proved the most destructive. After the unreality of his early beach patrols, infantryman Tim O'Brien would find carnage in the jungle, while seldom finding the enemy. Grenades were turned into tiny landmines almost impossible to detect, buried in tin cans with a trip wire: these were 'toe-poppers', but others would shred their victims. 'The most feared mine', O'Brien remembers 'was the "Bouncing Betty". It was conical shaped, three prongs jutting out of the soil. When your foot hit the prong, a charge went off that shot the mine into the air, a yard high, showering shrapnel everywhere. It's a mine that goes after the lower torso: a terrible mine.'

The guerrillas made huge mines from converted mortar and artillery shells. O'Brien saw the results. On one occasion after his company had encamped and sent out patrols there was a large explosion only 200 yards away. Says O'Brien, 'I put out a radio call but no answer – and the captain was kind of joking, saying it was probably just a stray artillery round. Half an hour later one of the survivors hobbled back and said, "They're gone – they're all gone." We raced out there and only two men were living out of a patrol of eight or so. Just a mess. It was like a stew, full of meat and flesh and red tissue and white bone.'

The search missions were therefore very much a two-edged sword, for while the American tactic depended on contact, the guerrilla – particularly in more populated areas – had only to know or anticipate the American patrol routes or pattern. The high US death rate *without actual combat* (about eleven per cent killed in ambush) would greatly contribute to the later breakdown of American military discipline and morale, leading to frequent mutiny on patrols and the 'fragging' or murder of unpopular officers, and increasingly a

venting of frustration on civilians which – in an uncensored war, and media advances effectively render all contemporary war uncensored – was the most self-defeating aspect of all. By the end of 1967, with the worst fighting to come, US combat deaths again tripled within one year to more than 16,000.

At this juncture the 'enclave' policy of 'waiting and waiting' until there was a negotiated settlement seemed to its advocates the right but irretrievable course. The struggle was still one for military control; until this was achieved the political objective, of village pacification, would be as elusive as the enemy. Short of enlarging the war (which would become the recommendation) some basic questions had now to be posed: 1. were the patrols sufficiently effective to warrant the tactics; 2. was the rank-and-file leadership experienced enough to conduct a counter-guerrilla war; 3. were mobility and fire-power offset by inappropriate fighting techniques; and 4. allowing for corrective measures in these areas, was the basic strategy sound: was the opponent really being attrited?

On the question of patrols Major Joe Anderson, one of the longest serving and most decorated officers, describes his platoon as 'professionals . . . quite anxious and willing to come in contact with the enemy' but the contacts 'were rather infrequent'. 'During the months that I was a platoon leader in the field,' says Anderson, 'there were probably only four or five significant contacts in that whole period. Other times there would be fleeting engagements but no real fights.'

Anderson, a black officer, emphasizes that Americans in Vietnam would always accept and follow experienced leadership. Another black veteran, Marine Corps rifleman Charles Johnson, considers that inexperienced officers were a losing factor. Johnson was eighteen – the average infantry age – when he arrived in Vietnam in 1967. He was part of a 'roving battalion', meaning 'we went where the action was or wherever they needed a unit to plug the gap'. He had the most hazardous job in his platoon – 'walking point' as the advance man. He was wounded twice and decorated twice – receiving his second 'Purple Heart' personally from President Johnson – but the experiences of foot-soldier Johnson would subsequently necessitate psychiatric treatment for ten years.

On an early jungle patrol Johnson found that his company commander was not only 'fresh from the United States, he was fresh from Officer School.' With rations for only one day's patrol 'we stayed in the bush for three days and three nights simply because we were lost. This gentleman wouldn't listen to anyone. I know for a fact that we crossed the same river three times and I made every attempt to indicate that to him, but of course I had no jurisdiction as to which way we should go.'

Against a hostile terrain and an opponent who had lived and fought in it for years, the US with its reliance on mobility and technology gave its men officers who often had no combat experience and who, in the majority of cases, were rotated after six months – or half the duty tour of the men whose lives they commanded. General Westmoreland is highly critical of this: 'It may have been that the career management people in the Pentagon, who wanted to give every career officer enough tour for a command experience, encouraged that. There was a far greater turnover among commanders than I would like to have seen.'

Military analyst Brian Jenkins feels that 'many people in the American military' regarded Vietnam as 'the exotic interlude between the wars that really count – World War II in the past and World War III in the future'. He contends that even the one-year duty tour for enlisted men made no sense: it improved morale but, he predicted, would only produce 'high-morale losers'. The US Army was 'like a recording tape that is erased every twelve months. It condemns us to learning the same lessons over and over again.' A long-time Special Forces officer, Jenkins had joined Westmoreland's MACV headquarters staff as a member of its Long Range Planning Task Group. He prepared numerous written critiques (which he felt went unread) for MACV, and later for the Rand Corporation. Among the higher echelon, Jenkins says, 'there was a tendency to simply say that Vietnam was not worth it. To put it in the words of one senior military commander, "I'll be damned if I see the US army, its history, its doctrine, its institutions, alter just to win this lousy war". And that attitude, of course, was a tremendous impediment to making the kinds of changes that some thought were necessary; doctrinal changes in the style of fighting.'

On this next related question of fighting techniques, Captain Dave Christian says that for all the rapid deployment the US in Vietnam was 'fighting a defensive war' – airlifting in every support mechanism. Christian's unit was part of the 1st Battalion/26th Infantry command of General Alexander Haig, later NATO Supreme Commander and US Secretary of State from 1981. Christian, who has seven of the highest medals to show for his multiple wounds and who twice received the last rites on the battlefield, says that large infantry units when deployed were like 'a herd of elephants coming'; the guerrillas would go to ground – literally, in huge tunnel complexes – letting the Americans 'walk right through and then when they were through set up camp again'. In Christian's view the new airmobile support system was 'outmoded' in Vietnam.

Even when deployed in force, says analyst Brian Jenkins, US infantry was 'fighting the last war' or worse. 'They carried an enormous amount of equipment; just far more than was necessary. It was burdensome in the environment, in the climate, to move.' The doctrine was of old: '. . . two companies up and one back; almost eighteenth-century style of fighting'. This seemed 'belied' by the helicopters, but 'on the ground it was a very ponderous thing'.

As might be expected, the North Vietnamese view of Westmoreland's tactics is wholly negative: Premier Pham Van Dong at the time likened the American soldier to a blind heavyweight boxer and 'the heavier he is, the easier target he becomes'. Yet the analysis of Colonel Ha Van Lau hardly differs from that of American critics. 'The GI was a fighter that we believed had a certain technical and theoretical molding,' he says. 'He was very well equipped and trained. Nevertheless, in terms of being a fighter in a sophisticated army like the American army he didn't adapt easily. Heavily equipped, the GI didn't get around easily and made himself a vulnerable target for guerrillas. Can you imagine a GI operation in the jungle which had fresh water flown in by helicopter? In these conditions the GI could not support for a long time the deprivations and the difficulties of war.'

On the one hand, searching out the smaller, roving Communist units was exacting a high cost on American forces and objectives; on the other hand, attacking large known enemy bases necessitated enormous effort for marginal results. As Westmoreland himself notes, the US had 'the military muscle' to go in and 'disrupt' these bases. It did not have the means to occupy them and disruption, on whatever scale, could therefore only be a temporary setback. One of the largest and longest US offensives was Operation Attleboro (September-November 1966) against the heavily forested war zone C, spreading north and west of Saigon towards the Cambodian border. Westmoreland describes what it took to attack a base area 'developed over a period of decades'.

'The Vietnamese, before we arrived,' he says, 'would never dare go in there because it was totally dominated by the enemy. The enemy had great tunnel complexes in there. They had their headquarters well dug in and camouflaged. They had their supply dumps there. And it was necessary for us to go in and disrupt that – but you couldn't go in with companies or battalions. They would have been chewed up, ambushed and decimated. It took a massive troop effort to go in there with safety and get the job done with minimum losses.'

The operation was launched. Westmoreland deployed 22,000 men. Within hours the helicopters had lifted in the equivalent of two divisions. 'Dust Off' helicopters brought out the wounded from initial scattered resistance. After artillery and air force pounding, the troops searched for bunkers. GIs called 'tunnel rats' sealed the entrances with hand grenades, then pumped acetylene gas into suspected tunnel-complexes, detonating the gas with dynamite. But left-wing journalist Wilfred Burchett, who briefly stayed under fire in this Communist base, says the tunnels were a series of sealed chambers, each elaborately constructed with bamboo, and in just one underground area which he observed 'this particular tunnel extended for about twenty kilometers' with numerous side branches. He was told 'if things get too hot here we can come out under another village' and enter another complex, and 'there was nothing to worry about'. Operation Attleboro lasted seventy-two days. According to US military records there were '1106 known enemy casualties', hardly more than from the original three-day Chu Lai action.

Was the strategy of attrition working? As military analyst Brian Jenkins puts it: 'Ultimately the superiority of weapons would prevail. Hard fought battles were ultimately won. But that was the whole point – if the opponent wanted to give battle it would have been an easy military contest. The other part is that the military success did not translate into political success.' Or there was no territorial gain.

By mid-1967 the US force level in Vietnam had risen to 431,000, and Westmoreland had Defense Secretary McNamara's approval for a troop ceiling of 543,000. But McNamara – now privately doubting the war's cost effectiveness – wanted clearer evidence that additional troops were necessary. Attrition of the enemy, the only measure of any eventual political success, had to be proved. 'I desire and expect', McNamara told Westmoreland, 'a detailed line by line analysis of these requirements to determine that each is truly essential.'

'Mr McNamara', says Westmoreland, 'was very strong on statistics; as a businessman that was his main tool.' In the General's words there were not enough troops to occupy 'the real estate and nail it down'; therefore 'it was not unreasonable to try to set up some rules of measurement as to progress and we had to do this and we had to report them on a weekly basis'. Westmoreland had been critical of his predecessor's optimistic reporting, and of inflated statistics by ARVN commanders, but now American forces found themselves in the position of being judged in a numbers game. It was easier to tell Washington what it presumably wanted to hear: indeed, careers, promotions, privileges might depend on it. The 'body-count' now became the measure of the war – a highly inflated one, it would later be admitted. MACV's unheard critic Brian Jenkins wrote 'tactics rather than strategy' are the measure; hence 'Good tactics are evidenced by a large number of enemy dead on the battlefield.'

But the apparent rapid decimation of the enemy that followed at least had political value in the United States, where the burning of draft cards and an organized anti-war movement was developing. Senior planners like William Bundy were now beginning to worry that Vietnam might become an 'albatross' around the nation's neck. 'I can remember all too vividly,' says Bundy, 'that when the Korean war dragged on inconclusively a very great counter-tide grew up against this politically.' Bundy was prescient, and he felt a need more fully to 'explain to the country what was being done to keep support strong'. Westmoreland felt the same: he had long since advocated a program 'to get American people more emotionally involved and more appreciative of what was going on. But that suggestion was not accepted. There was a real fear . . . that the hawks would be stirred up.'

Yet the American people had to be told something. As President Johnson put it on television, 'Our American people, when we get in a contest of any kind, whether it's in a war or an election or in a football game, want it decided and decided quickly, and get in or get out, and they like for that curve [raising his arm] to rise like this, and they like for the opposition to go down [dropping his arm] like this.' The 'kill' curve would now rise dramatically if deceptively.

A study by the author of US military operations listing 500 or more 'known enemy casualties' shows that in 1966 only seventeen such operations were recorded; in 1967 there were twenty-eight and in the first half of 1968 (at the point President Johnson de-escalated the war and opened peace negotiations) there were twenty-five. Whereas Operation Attleboro, one of the largest offensives of the war in late 1966, resulted in 1106 enemy casualties, future comparable operations would report casualties ranging from 3000 to 10,000. Over the three-year period the official body-count in these operations rose from around 15,000 in 1966 to 50,000 in 1967 and to more than 50,000 by mid-1968. Though the number of such operations increased only fifty per cent in each period, the kill-claim increased more than 300 per cent. As Brian Jenkins says, 'There were no auditors of the system. The body-counts were enormously inflated.'

Jenkins, joining MACV headquarters with its pressure for a weekly death watch, recalls one operation in which 'nineteen dead could be verified – soldiers that had been killed, soldiers with weapons – and the estimate was that perhaps thirty had been killed'. But the estimate went through different reporting channels which dealt with it in an 'accumulative' fashion: so many may have been killed but not verified, so many may have died later from wounds, so many may have been killed in air strikes '. . . so that a relatively small engagement, in this particular case perhaps involving thirty casualties, would by the time it had been briefed at headquarters, and entered in the books, begin to approximate the Battle of the Bulge.'

At times the body-count was no more than black comedy. Corporal Matt Martin grew up in a rough area of Philadelphia and volunteered for the Marines – and for a second year in Vietnam. He spent half the time on active duty and says 'The more regular you were, regular Marine, regular army, the higher the body-count was. We had a colonel call in and he was all excited, and he said, "What's the body-count, what's the body-count?" because we had called in a lot of heavy artillery, we were really putting the job on this one village. So he wanted a real heavy body-count. Well this second Louie we had with us – he'd come up through the ranks – and he yelled, "Over 300". So then the radio man said, "You can't give them an even number. They're not going to go for an even number". So he said "Well, okay, 311". Three hundred eleven flat out deaths, sure kills. Well this officer loved it. He started yelling "Great, great, you did a great job".

'Well actually what had happened was one of our jeeps had turned over and killed this old man. And we had one sure kill. And it was an accident.' Adds Martin. 'It was always better if you had a good kill count 'cause everything would come your way. You'd get better supplies; steaks, booze once in a while. Everything would come your way.' It should be noted that such individual accounts are impossible to verify, but Westmoreland himself subsequently agreed that the statistics 'were somewhat overdone.'

Yet in November 1967, Westmoreland on a visit to Washington publicly stated: 'I could quote a number of meaningful statistics such as the roads that are being opened, the increasing number of enemy that are being killed, the number of defectors that are coming in from the Communist side to the government, the numbers of weapons being captured, and other statistical information that we are making progress and we are winning.'

Responds Jenkins, 'In the absence of geographically measurable criteria, we substituted quantitative criteria, counting this and counting that, and according to those criteria we were always succeeding. We may not have won but we were always, in a sense, winning.' The MACV analyst says 'inflated body-counts' were a major factor in 'suggesting to us that we were doing better than we were'. But he points out that even had the figures been true the policy of attrition had 'an inherent flaw' by assuming that it would have a 'deterrent effect on the enemy – and that simply was not the case'. North Vietnam's leaders were 'prepared to fight to the year 2000'.

In Jenkins' analysis, the exaggerated measuring of the war arose from other problems fundamentally far more serious and with contemporary implications. There was the impatience for victory and the enormous commitment of resources, yet an inability to adapt military doctrine and command structure to the situation. The ultimate responsibility – and blame – lay with the political Cabinet in Washington, a failure of intelligence and authority; the culpability lay with the military which failed to advise change and indeed resisted it. In this Jenkins sees Westmoreland as the victim: '... his powers in some cases were quite limited' and there was 'a tremendous amount of interference' even at 'very low levels' from 'various entities in Washington. There were a good many people running that war. There was no American proconsul.'

Westmoreland was subordinate to the US Ambassador, and by extension various levels of the State Department, and to CINCPAC (Pacific) headquarters in Honolulu. The US Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps engaged in Vietnam were under the ultimate authority of CINCPAC – and were not loath to exploit this. The air war against the North was also commanded from CINCPAC with personal direction from President Johnson. General Westmoreland felt that he was not permitted the input and direction vital to the success of his mission.

'The responsibility of the war', he says, 'was a divided one. It was divided between the Ambassador and myself, and the Commander in Chief of the Pacific. I am somewhat critical of this because I feel that it would have been better if it could have been a unified effort – which would have gone contrary to some of the service doctrine.''

The extent of division between the two senior US officials in Vietnam is only now revealed. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge subsequently expressed what could not be expediently voiced during his second posting to Saigon, 1965-67. 'I liked General Westmoreland and he's a great friend of mine,' says Lodge, 'but I thought we had a lot to learn from the way the British handled the situation in Malaysia. Sir Robert Thompson was an official advisor to us and he was also an official advisor to Sir Gerald Templar who was Chief of the British Mission (in former Malaya) and it took them twelve years to bring about a political and economic set up in Malaysia which would enable them to get order and keep it – but not if you did it in a hurry. It took them twelve years. The idea in our camp was that we haven't got the time; we've got to clean this thing up in not more than two years.

'Well you couldn't for many reasons. If you do it in twelve years and focus on the political and on the economic you reduce your casualties to very, very little – and you get lasting results. Well now, I don't think that that was what General Westmoreland thought, but that's what I thought.'

Ambassador Lodge implies that in the enlarged combat period Westmoreland subscribed to or had resigned himself to supporting this unreality. Westmoreland would tell the press in November 1967: 'The enemy has failed in achieving its objectives. We have succeeded in obtaining our objectives.' At the same time he was requesting 75,000 more troops. But in fairness Westmoreland had consistently warned Washington that it should prepare for – and counsel the public to expect – a protracted war. By 1967 the enlarged, undeclared and therefore uncensored war was by its very scale tilting to defeat. The media or the messenger could be blamed for videoing scenes of death and destruction, but it had little more to show: 'Hearts and Minds' was still an abstraction, and perhaps another apt acronym. Westmoreland felt that the press and domestic political repercussions – rather than his enemy – would defeat him unless there was an immediate all-out effort. America was succeeding but there had to be a big push before the public tired. He sensed that he had perhaps twelve months, certainly not twelve years.

Westmoreland would describe Sir Robert Thompson's advice. It was that 'American preoccupation with the enemy's big units was wrong, that the first priority should be to identify and break the guerrilla infrastructure [also advocated and belatedly tried by the CIA], thus denying the big units their sustenance'. But, says Westmoreland, 'Sir Robert's analysis of where the big units were getting their supplies was incomplete and oversimplified'. In his article on the strategy of attrition, Westmoreland points out two basic differences between the insurrections in Malaya and Vietnam. In Malaya 'the bulk of the insurgents were ethnic Chinese and thus were identifiable within the population' and 'there was no immunity for the insurgents in sanctuaries outside the country. It was not until Tet occurred [February 1968] that Sir Robert truly understood the magnitude and potential of the enemy's main forces.'

Westmoreland would break the Communist Tet Offensive – only to see America recoil from the cost: a vindication of his fears but not of his tactics. Tet would deliver what Westmoreland was now asking for – heightened confrontation, but prior to Tet the war would seem relatively slow paced, relatively acceptable, and the sudden escalation of a distant war would wipe out the years of effort. At Tet it could be argued that the Communists were doing what the British had advised the Americans to do: they were concentrating military force against towns and cities to try and break the government infrastructure and public morale. Until one side or other achieved this what meaning had military victories or setbacks? It was said of North Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap that he lost many battles but never lost a war. In a revealing comment on the conceptual differences, General Westmoreland says: 'Throughout the war we never lost a battle. We had some companies that were badly hurt . . . but we did not lose a battle of consequence.' The point, of course, is that in a struggle of political ideas there is no battle of consequence until the final one.

Some of the criticism of Westmoreland would be extremely harsh – 'the most disastrous American general since Custer' says historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. A fairer criticism would be that Westmoreland was in a no-win situation. A politically oriented war was not, anyhow, his mandate. He was just the assignee of a man in a hurry, President Johnson, whose directive was the proverbial 'Git thar fustest with mostest'. And the military restrictions placed on Westmoreland – however wise – allowed him no final battle. Yet until the very end of his command (June 1968) he was given whatever he asked for, and given to understand, he says, that he could geographically expand the war – even though Washington, as now clearly emerges, had begun to doubt both the arguments for more troops and firepower and Westmoreland's direction of these.

The influential Secretary of the Navy, Paul Nitze, a confidant of Defense Secretary McNamara, describes Westmoreland: 'I know him to be an absolutely outstanding man, a man of great character and honor. So that isn't the question. The question at issue is whether he was as subtle a general and as wise in his dispositions and . . . in his actions as one could have hoped for.'

McNamara himself in June 1967 was quietly preparing the historic internal study of decision making and strategy, to be known as the *Pentagon Papers*. From 1966 he had become tormented by doubts. His principal Deputy Assistant at that time, Adam Yarmolinsky, says McNamara already believed that 'this was not a war that could be won, or not at a cost that could be justified either to the American people or to the jury of the civilized world. It was a terrible mistake to have gotten into it: that we had made it an issue when it should not have been an issue.'

The war leaders were telling the public one thing while knowing the actual picture to be very different. Johnson did not want to hear McNamara's doubts, dismissing them as 'a nervous breakdown,' and he did not want Westmoreland's enlarged war: he simply wanted the boys home, somehow, by this Christmas or the next. In Washington in July 1967, while telling the press that America was 'succeeding', Westmoreland discloses what occurred at a White House meeting with Johnson and McNamara.

Westmoreland, though publicly optimistic, had not stated when the war might be over. His earlier three-phase, two-year projection was always predicated, he claims, on the understanding that if needs be 'restraints' would be lifted. His new optimism coincided with a reduction in Communist battle activity (what proved to be one of Hanoi's cyclical moves to re-evaluate and rebuild, preceding the Tet Offensive). Now was the time for the big push and Westmoreland presented plans worked out with the Joint Chiefs of Staff: 'I had two troop lists; I had what I considered a minimum essential and then I had an optimum.' His minimum position was for a new ceiling of 543,400 troops to consolidate; his optimum was whatever were needed to take the ground war beyond South Vietnam.

'I was asked by Mr McNamara', Westmoreland says, 'how long it would take with those two increments to wind the war down. I said, with the minimum essential it will take at least five years, but my estimate is that if we had the optimum we could probably do it in three years. We could cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail; we could clean out the enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia, we could block his lines of supply by sea and by land, and we could also take action against those troops immediately north of the demilitarized zone.'

The US President was hearing a recommendation to invade North Vietnam while being told that even then victory was at least three years away. And, Westmoreland reveals, 'plans were prepared to do all of that'.

President Johnson, however, merely announced that '. . . the troops that General Westmoreland needs and requests – as we feel it necessary – will be supplied'. Johnson then authorized only the minimum increment. Johnson and McNamara would be portrayed as going along with military planning only to control it.

Says Assistant Secretary of State, William Bundy: 'Then, or at any other time when the question of American forces being used against the North itself came up, the arguments against doing so – to all of us in the Johnson administration – seemed overwhelming. It would change the whole nature of the war. It might or might not work militarily. We always thought there was a flash point along the way, as there had been in Korea, where if we moved against North Vietnam itself we would very likely see a massive Chinese counter-intervention with ground forces.'

Westmoreland's conclusion is that the US military would have won if 'it hadn't been for political decisions that prohibited that'. The military, he says, 'did not have the liberty to exercise the mobility we acquired starting in 1966. We didn't have the political authority to extend the battlefield. We had the capability.'

On the differences between the military and political authorities over limitations of the war, analyst Brian Jenkins wrote that the military 'could search for the flaws in its own doctrine' or it could 'try to save face with "stab in the back" theories'. In a 1970 government-commissioned study, Jenkins viewed the US military as being the victim in Vietnam of 'its own doctrinal and organizational rigidity'. He drew an accurate scenario in which US methods would be passed to the South Vietnamese and they would quickly lose. He challenged 'the view that the war in Vietnam is an aberration and does not represent the future demands that the army might have to face.' He caustically noted that if progress in war was to be judged by statistics then the military had ignored the ones that mattered: 'It has been demonstrated