

Sir Robert Grainger Ker Thompson and the ARVN:
Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

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Preface:

Robert Thompson's name has become synonymous with counter-insurgency warfare and rightly so – as his ideas proved victorious in Malaya over the MCP (Malayan Communist Party) inspired insurgency; a failed revolutionary attempt that began in the immediate post-World War II era. Yet, this paper's purpose is not to focus on this very current issue (i.e., that of COIN) but, instead, to examine Thompson's perspective on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, ARVN. In so much as his perspective on ARVN crosses into some counter-insurgency aspects – this effort will look at them; otherwise, Sir Robert Thompson's expertise and ideas, with regard to COIN, are left to another study.

Introductory Note:

For the purpose of expedient organization, this analysis has been constructed in three segments:

'The Early Years,' as perceived in the first of Thompson's Vietnam trilogy,

DEFEATING COMMUNIST INSURGENCY: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam, London: Chatto & Windus, 1966;

'The Middle Years,' as can be read in No Exit From Vietnam, London: Chatto & Windus, 1969;

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

'The Late Years,' made manifest in Peace Is Not At Hand, London: Chatto & Windus, 1974;

The reader will see that Thompson's perspective on the ARVN had evolved considerably by the time he compiled his final book, Peace is Not At Hand, and that this evolution was rather astounding as he had espoused much more praise for the Vietnamese military than in his earlier works.

Robert Thompson's Background:

Robert Thompson was born during the First World War (1916) and was later educated at Cambridge University.

He entered the Malayan Civil Service in 1938 and during WWII served as an officer in the RAF; he escaped from the Japanese capture of Hong Kong and subsequently served with the Chindits' operations in Burma. During the war he won the Military Cross (one of the top medals for valor - awarded to officers) and the DSO.

After the war, Thompson returned to Malaya where he was almost immediately caught up in security issues brought about by the Emergency declared against the MCP (Malayan Communist Party) and their insurgent/terrorist war.

From 1957 to 1961 he moved from the post of Deputy Secretary of Defense to actual full Secretary in the Federation of Malaya. Then, in 1961 he headed up the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam; this lasted until 1965.

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

He went back to Vietnam several times after this as a White House consultant and with the United Nations.

Starting with President Ngo Dinh Diem, Thompson developed a profound respect for the Vietnamese. Indeed, he fought particularly hard against the Washington, State Department-inspired moves to get rid of Diem. Like William Colby, he thought the murder of Diem was catastrophic to the prosecution of a sound counter-insurgency campaign in South Vietnam.

Along the way, Thompson developed a genuine admiration for the ARVN and their obvious struggles against the VC and NVA and for their not so obvious rear-guard action against US denigration – a morale-sapping fact that they, the South Vietnamese military, had to learn to live with.

Accordingly, it is the purpose of this paper/presentation to examine how his perspective on the ARVN developed.

The Early Years:

Thompson's first critique of the ARVN, which was published in his seminal work "**Defeating Communist Insurgency**," in 1966, had little to say about the quality of the actual recruits or their fighting capabilities; instead, he focused on the flawed structure of ARVN. He noted that it was a very large army born out of the necessity for some kind of actual government infrastructure in the South as, simply, nothing much else existed! In addition to this, he noted that the South lacked any meaningful administrative structure or judicial system yet it became

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

simultaneously "...saddled with a major policy decision which either offended, or caused an inevitable breach of, all the principles [of counter-insurgency]."¹ This major offending policy decision was none other than the creation of a large conventional army.²

Thompson was aware that this large army had been created in the expectation of meeting the sort of conventional Communist incursion that Korea had – as opposed to the sorts of insurgencies fought in the Philippines or Malaya. He stated bluntly that this was a wrong assessment of the threat that

¹ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, page: 58

Thompson's basic principles of counter-insurgency are as follows:

- i.) The government must have a clear political aim: to establish and maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable.
- ii.) The government must function in accordance with the law.
- iii.) The government must have an overall plan. This plan must cover not just the security measures and military operations. It must include all political, social, economic, administrative, police and other measures which have a bearing on the insurgency. Above all it must clearly define roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that there are no gaps in the government's field of action.
It is essential too, that there should be a proper balance between the military and the civil effort, with complete coordination in all fields. Otherwise a situation will arise in which military operations produce no lasting results because they are unsupported by civil follow-up action. Similarly, civilian measures, particularly in areas disputed with the insurgents, are a waste of time and money if they are unsupported by military operations to provide the necessary protections.
- iv.) The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas.
- v.) In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base areas first.

² Ibid.

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

faced South Vietnam during the mid to late 1950's and early 1960's.³ Here are the critical points that he noted in relation to creating this large, 200,000 man force:

Political power, inevitably, rested almost exclusively with control of the army.

Subsequent to the above political reality coming into being with the 200,000 man ARVN, President Diem was forced to devote much of his time and energy to manipulating the army commands in order to retain control and maintain his position. In turn, this created the pointless nagging at him (Diem) to broaden the political base of his government and attract more popular support; this was pointless because the political power in South Vietnam did not reside with the people but within the army!

Diem told Thompson, in 1962, that any successor to his government would have to be twice as oppressive as he himself had been – if he wanted to maintain an effective government with no coup attempts (Diem having suffered a couple before the final one of November 1963).

The very conventional design of the ARVN, with its corps and divisional commands, created a warlord perspective in the senior commanders as all power did in fact rest with them and this, in turn, fired their political ambitions.⁴

This large army created sizeable economic problems tying the GVN ever closer to US aid and subsidies. The best and brightest were all attracted into the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. pages: 58 - 59

GVN's military – leaving not many educated or motivated individuals to fill the ranks of the other vital areas of the civil service. It became immediately apparent that the educational standards of officials who had to implement government policy in the provinces were too low and army officers had to be transferred in to do this critical work.⁵

In fact, as Thompson contends, the gargantuan size of the ARVN acted with a gravitational pull that drew the best of every vital service toward it – from hospital services and personal through to communications specialists and their equipment; ARVN was becoming more like an occupying power:

“What in effect was happening was that the army, organized on conventional lines to defeat a foreign invader and to occupy and administer a foreign country, was attempting to do almost exactly that in its own country. This created a completely wrong attitude and led to operations and actions which might just have been excusable as acts of war if carried out in enemy territory. The one vital aspect of civic action which the army failed to develop was good, strict, disciplined behaviour towards its won population.”⁶

Thompson's final note of criticism against the early ARVN was concerned with the fact that the large, conventional organization of the military led, quite naturally, to large conventional operations. This, in turn, was exacerbated by constant changes among corps and divisional commanders who were looking for glory and a career boost via the means of quick and spectacular military victories in the field. This resulted in the following:

“Time and time again the following type of report would appear in the newspapers: ‘A two-day operation involving some 1,200 Vietnamese troops against a Viet Cong stronghold twenty-five miles north of Saigon ended early Wednesday with practically no results. Military sources said one Viet Cong

⁵ Ibid. page: 60

⁶ Ibid.

woman was captured and one friendly soldier was killed by sniper fire in the operation.’ Not all reports were quite so frank.”⁷

Not a very flattering early-years assessment by Thompson; yet, it cannot be forgotten that he maintained excellent relations with Ngo Dinh Diem and was whole-heartedly behind the Strategic Hamlets conception which, of course, is another story entirely. It also needs to be said that Thompson never lost sight of the fact that there were many fine and very capable ARVN soldiers; his early criticisms were not so much against the soldiering being done as they were against the entire organizational concept of the ARVN which, his experience told him, was anathema to sound counter-insurgency warfare.

The Middle Years:

In his middle-years assessment, documented in his book *No Exit From Vietnam*, Thompson starts off with the frank acknowledgement that the ARVN was not being properly led after the murder of Diem and this resulted in the government and military alike teetering on the brink of collapse in 1965; – thus necessitating President Johnson’s plunge in with US forces: “As it was American forces were only just in time to save the day.”⁸ Yet, this ‘saving-of-the-day’ by US forces brought with it other problems as an unsteady ARVN (1965-1967) tended to leave the main fighting to the United States’ military which, in turn, caused an increasing American disenchantment with things ARVN – causing the

⁷ Ibid. pages: 60 - 61

⁸ Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam*; London: Chatto & Windus, 1966; page: 16

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

Vietnamese to further abandon the combat cause to the Americans. A perfect vicious circle had been created!⁹

Hanoi, of course, was delighted with this arrangement, as Thompson noted:

*Casualties inflicted on the United States forces not only sapped South Vietnamese confidence in the ability of the United States to save them but were, by implication, a message to ARVN that, if they got into the thick of the fight, their casualties would be higher still. Hanoi was reasonably confident that, if the main force units took on the Americans and kept them occupied, then the guerrilla units operating in the countryside would be more than a match for the South Vietnamese and could tighten the process of encircling the cities.*¹⁰

At this juncture, Thompson returned to a favorite theme of his: that the American strategy was a failure and that this failure was accentuated by the greatest obstruction to any form of military and political progress: i.e., the creation of too large an ARVN! This military behemoth had upset the core balance of the country: politically, socially, and economically. Relatedly, the building of too large an ARVN led to the diminutive stature of the police forces – the very forces that, in Thompson’s experience, were the most critical to defeating a Communist insurgency. The army was acting like a stellar black-hole, sucking in all of the country’s resources so that by 1968 Thompson was able to make the following observation:

Even at the beginning of 1968 it was incredible that the South Vietnamese police force had only just reached a strength that the country would have required in

⁹ Ibid. page: 57.

¹⁰ Ibid. page: 57

It should be noted that in 1965 ARVN had approximately 227,000 troops (this is excluding 12,500 in the Air Force, 9,000 in the Navy, 150,000 in the Popular Forces, 105,000 in the Regional Forces and 50,000 policemen).

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

normal times of peace. Out of 70,000 men 50,000 had had the skimpiest training, mainly in weapons, and only 10,000 were on a regular engagement. Even so they still proved their worth, with few exceptions, during the Tet offensive. Without an effective police force, as a territorially based organization, it also proved impossible to organize and control the many paramilitary forces which had been established for local defense.¹¹

Thompson's 'middle year' critique casts a very ominous light on 1968 noting, amongst other things, that the emphasis in Vietnam had always been on quantity with US encouragement pressing Vietnamese forces from 600,000 to 900,000 in the hope that this would also permit America to start withdrawing some of her combat forces. Yet, none of the US planners were asking themselves the obvious question: i.e., if 600,000 men were under-trained, badly organized, ill-disciplined and poorly equipped in places, would not 900,000 men be even worse, greatly compounding the confusion?¹² As such, he argued that the real answer to ARVN's burgeoning dilemma was reorganization and retraining of the 600,000 men as this would also help to improve morale as well.¹³

By 1969, Thompson argued that the US and the GVN had to take a very sober look at how they were fighting the war and, in particular, how they would reorganize the ARVN to be an effective force. From what he could see there was no reasonable exit from Vietnam for America and, as such, the tough work that would lead to success would have to be undertaken with vigor:

¹¹ Ibid. page: 124

¹² Ibid. page: 171

¹³ Ibid.

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

To be successful, the first requirement is reorganization to provide for joint American/South Vietnamese control machinery at all levels as a means of ensuring a more coordinated and integrated effort in every aspect of the war. On the military side the joint command established in the Saigon area should be considered for the Corps and Divisional Commands (but excluding reserve forces). At the same time there should be a complete reorganization, including some amalgamation, of all South Vietnamese paramilitary forces, followed by retraining courses to improve the performance of those now under arms before there is any question of increasing the numbers.¹⁴

It should be noted that Thompson, during this period, was not always specific about whose numbers should or should not be increased: i.e., whether he meant just the paramilitary forces or ARVN as well was not always clear; but he was very clear about a thorough-going need for reorganization and training across the board.

A final note on Thompson's middle year's critique of the ARVN (as noted in NO EXIT FROM VIETNAM) would have to include the fact that this encompassed the period of his harshest criticisms. Nevertheless, tough as he had been in his analysis one is left with the abiding sense that he had, by no means, given up on the potential of the ARVN and that the raw ingredients of a very fine army were there but they needed serious work.

The Late Years:

When Thompson penned the final work in his Vietnam War trilogy, Peace Is Not At Hand, in 1974, one notices a change in his critical tone. More often than not, he lavishes praise on the fighting capabilities of the ARVN and he heavily criticizes the military blunders of the NVA. Yet, one cannot help but pick up the not-so-subliminal message which is directed to the Americans: i.e., "... don't cut

¹⁴ Ibid. page 197

and run – your valiant allies, the South Vietnamese, need you at this crucial hour.”

The change in tone starts off with Thompson noting how the NVA brutalities were driving recruits into the arms of none other than ARVN and, as such, it was small wonder that the South’s army now boasted over 600 infantry battalions!¹⁵ Indeed, Thompson goes through a litany of NVA atrocities which he claimed were far worse than anything the American forces or the ARVN had inflicted on anyone in the country (North or South). In his own words:

At a time when Hanoi was complaining of its six civilian casualties, as a result of the first American raid on the North in April after the 1972 invasion began, its own troops were firing 122mm rockets indiscriminately into Saigon and Phnom Penh killing more than ten times that number. Over 70,000 rounds of mortar and artillery were fired into An Loc during the siege, pounding it to rubble (7,000 rounds were fired in one night) and over 1,100 civilian were killed. The NVA’s 130mm Russian guns did much the same to Kontum and Quang Tri. When the civilian population fled from the latter there followed, in the words of a British war correspondent ‘an act of calculated butchery unprecedented even in this conflict. Forward observers for the communist artillery targeted the columns of desperate refugees. They blasted them on the roads and in the fields, whether they traveled by truck, car, bicycle or on foot.’ The world was not intended to see this but it was revealed in all its horror when Quang Tri was later recaptured. The casualties along Route 1 (the stretch of road is now known as ‘La Route Terrible’) were estimated at over 20,000. I regret that I am not one of those who subscribes to the view that atrocities committed by shells and bullets in this way are all good clean civilized fun, whereas only casualties inflicted by bombs are evil. I might add that, as a result of these acts, I have had no moral qualms whatsoever about the bombing of the North, both as a retaliation and as a legitimate act of war.¹⁶

Here we can see the basis for Thompson’s notes on the NVA’s recruiting drive on behalf of the ARVN. The perspective has changed decidedly and ARVN no

¹⁵ Robert Thompson, Peace Is Not At Hand, London: Chatto & Windus, 1974; page: 40.

¹⁶ Ibid. pages: 41 – 42.

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

longer appears as the blundering behemoth in comparison to the civilian-murdering juggernaut of the NVA!

Thompson's moral outrage vis-à-vis NVA atrocity does not blind him to flaws that remain within the ARVN and he is quick to return to these when the opportunity best presents itself. Accordingly, we see these issues come to the fore when he addresses the strategy behind 'Vietnamization.'

With regard to the remaining flaws in ARVN, basically, Thompson states that the US neglected the proper development of the South Vietnamese military while they fought an 'American War' and now they were discovering that 'Vietnamization' necessitated much greater fundamental reconstruction than they originally had envisioned. The Tet Offensive, amongst many other things, had revealed that the ARVN could not match the small unit fire-power of even the VC in most cases; the M16, for all its nay-Sayers, was badly needed amongst South Vietnam's troops. But the problems did not stop simply with addressing small-unit firepower:

There was, however, one major weakness in both equipment and the structure of the forces. The whole design was defensive. There was no question at any time of equipping the South Vietnamese Army with weapons which might have enabled it to attack North Vietnamese supply routes and rear bases or even to conduct an effective counter-offensive. It was not even equipped to withstand a major conventional invasion. The structure of the forces, already defensive, was based on the concept of defending territory, especially populated territory, throughout the country. This meant that there was little flexibility in the deployment of forces because nearly all of them were already allocated to the defence of a particular area, with the army divided into four Regions and with only two divisions (the Airborne and the Marines) in national reserve. It was even more inflexible at the lower levels where Regional Forces were confined to their own province and Popular Force platoons to their own villages. It took a lot of time and effort to achieve more flexibility in moving forces across these arbitrary boundaries. Finally, there were still problems in the command structure – not at the top where President Thieu was firmly in control of his generals – but, for

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

example, when Naval and Air Force units were allocated to Regions the question arose, how far did they come under the command of the Army Regional Commander or stay under command of their headquarters in Saigon. At a lower level there were still problems with regard to the operational control of ARVN battalions or regiments allocated to a province to support pacification. But these problems of command and co-ordination had always been there and are common in all countries. They were much nearer to a solution in Vietnam in the 1970s that they were in the 1960s.¹⁷

So, what we see here is Thompson's criticisms of the ARVN as Vietnamization began and we also see a ray of light/hope with regard to improvements in ARVN vis-à-vis operational control at the battalion and regimental level. The discerning analyst will note that most of these criticisms are being quietly placed on the shoulders of the Americans who were responsible for ARVN's design in the first place. How much of this was Thompson's recognition that the Americans were going to leave no matter what and that the South Vietnamese had to be bolstered, morale-wise, is a matter of speculation. But there can be no doubt that his critique is being aimed steadily at the Americans for the most part.¹⁸

Thompson continues to note that the ARVN had no problems in filling its ranks with new recruits – especially in comparison to the Viet Cong in the post-1968 era; he found this to be exceptional good fortune for the following reasons:

In many ways this was remarkable because the South Vietnamese armed forces were constantly subjected to subtle and intensive psychological warfare by the other side;...At the same time ARVN's fighting qualities and performance were denigrated by their ally to an extent which would have demoralized most armies. What is more, right through the war, they took heavy casualties. Even between

¹⁷ Ibid. pages: 63 - 64

¹⁸ Thompson remained very unhappy about the development of the National Police Force, the most critical component to a sound counter-insurgency program in his opinion and based on his considerable experience. He called it the 'Cinderella' force – as it was robbed by ARVN; how much blame he allocated to the GVN or the Americans for this underdevelopment of the police cannot be definitively determined from his writings. Ibid. pages: 64 – 65.

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

*1965 and 1968 South Vietnamese killed in action exceeded American casualties in every week except three. By 1969 they were running at three to four times the American rate and this ratio steadily increased as American forces were withdrawn from the country or at least from combat.*¹⁹

From this point forward Thompson's perspective on the ARVN becomes increasingly respectful of their valiant effort and, conversely, ever more harsh of the American abandonment of their ally. Accordingly, he notes that by late summer of 1971, when American forces had been reduced to 200,000, these remaining US military personnel were almost completely dependent on ARVN for their protection until the ceasefire was reached (8 a.m., Sunday, 28th January, 1973).²⁰

It is at this juncture that Thompson gets really tough with his American political friends noting:

*Some earlier supporters of the war, whether from a change of judgment or failure of nerve, demanded immediate and precipitate withdrawal, while others like them, including many Senators, demanded a fixed target date often less than twelve months ahead. There was little to choose between them. The first were deserters and the second were dead-liners, who were really no more than deserters lacking even the courage to desert. With the number of Americans killed in action over ten years approaching 50,000 and with the enormous sums expended, they both argued: 'Surely we have done enough?' That is not a question that should ever be put by any Christian, parent, friend or ally. The British did not put it to the French after suffering 60,000 casualties (19,000 killed) in one day on the Somme in 1916 to relieve the pressure on Verdun. Perhaps they should have put it to the Americans in 1942. The question did not come well from a country which a few years before had been exhorted to 'pay any price.,' It augurs ill for the future, too, coming as it does from a people who have not yet been tested by major sacrifices.*²¹

¹⁹ Ibid. page: 66

²⁰ Ibid. page: 79

²¹ Ibid. page: 80

These are hard-hitting words indeed but one gets the sense of immediacy behind them: i.e., Thompson is desperately trying to encourage his American friends to stay the course.

Cambodia Spring 1970:

Thompson goes on to note a string of ARVN successes including the defeat of Communist forces across the border in Cambodia during the spring of 1970. He was never blind to some of ARVN's continuing problems and notes that ARVN had some mixed results in this campaign. However, he plainly describes it as a defeat for the Communist forces operating at the lower end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He explained that the loss of Sihanoukville, a direct result of this campaign, placed the NVA and the Viet Cong, who had been operating out of this whole eastern area of Cambodia (adjacent to Region III in Vietnam) in a difficult position as they had been rocked back on their heels and were logistically vulnerable.²²

The Lam Son 719 Raid:

This raid was conducted by ARVN, in early 1971, along Route 9 through to Tchepone in Laos. In Thompson's analysis the raid had gone well but they had also managed to stir up a 'hornets nest' of NVA. He noted that one Ranger battalion, having received 200 casualties and having inflicted three to four times this amount on the NVA, was able to withdraw from the raid in good order with all its weapons and carrying all it's wounded; in his words "There was no rout."²³

²² Ibid. pages: 87 -88

²³ Ibid. pages: 90 – 91.

Yet, the overall picture shown to the world by the news media distorted these military facts as Thompson explained:

*As with all raids, the objective was limited in both time and space. After causing as much damage as possible to supply dumps, the petrol pipeline and the trail [Ho Chi Minh], the time came to withdraw. A withdrawal in the face of the enemy is probably the most exacting operation of war, particularly after a raid. When a raid starts all the momentum is forward and units which get into trouble can be supported by those following. In a withdrawal, all the movement is in the opposite direction and any unit at the rear which gets into trouble is liable to be cut off with little chance of rescue. I have always thought it a good rule in conducting a raid to order the withdrawal at least three days before you think you should, otherwise there will be a scramble to get the rearguard units out. There was certainly a scramble in this case, the key consideration being to get the men out. **The picture of a South Vietnamese soldier coming out on the skids of a helicopter was flashed around the television screens of the world for days on end. It gave an unfair and false picture of the fighting quality of the South Vietnamese troops. All I can say is that, when I took part in a similar raid during World War II into North Burma (the first Chindit operation in 1943) and we were ordered to withdraw with about 150 miles to go to the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers to cross, I would have given anything to come out on the skids of a helicopter.**²⁴*

An Loc & Associated Operations 1972:

After this point, Thompson begins to really drive home the fighting qualities of the ARVN and in no uncertain terms. This came to the fore, in particular, when he described ARVN's performance during the An Loc operations mounted by the NVA; the purpose of these operations being to cut off supplies to Saigon and, if possible assault Saigon itself with raids. As a matter of factual military history, according to Thompson, the operations signally failed! At no time was Saigon's lifeline to and from the Delta, Route 4, cut. The VC failed to

²⁴ Ibid. page: 91.

mount any sort of meaningful raid into Saigon and coupled with the NVA's own failure at An Loc, the latter withdrew into Cambodia. Further attempts to dislodge ARVN's 7th Division in Kien Tuong province in the Delta, proved similarly unsuccessful for the NVA.²⁵

Let's look at some specific Thompson praise for ARVN at this juncture:

It will be noted that so far I have hardly mentioned American air support, because it is essential to emphasize first that air support would have been useless if ARVN had not held its ground and compelled the NVA to launch set piece attacks....The fighting quality of the ARVN soldier in defense, and the weight of American air power, were vital factors.²⁶

Thompson also emphasizes Vo Nguyen Giap's arrogance and underestimation of the ARVN in the An Loc and Kontum attacks: "He [Giap] just did not believe that ARVN, faced with Blitzkrieg tactics and superior Russian weaponry, would stand up to the NVA."²⁷ Indeed, as the fighting power of the NVA diminished in this invasion, owing to the fact that Giap's field commanders threw away their numerical advantages with shock assaults, ARVN's fighting power increased! With over 84,000 recruits, fully trained, replenishing ARVN's ranks; numbers that more than offset casualty losses.²⁸

Very near his concluding remarks of his final book on the war in Vietnam, Thompson also sums up his estimation of the ARVN:

²⁵ Ibid. page: 109.

²⁶ Ibid. pages: 109 - 110

²⁷ Ibid. page: 111

²⁸ Ibid. page: 112

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

*The South Vietnamese people have fought on a scale and at a cost which far outweighs any contribution made by the United States and their resilience and stamina have been incomparable. There have been many ignorant critics of their fighting quality. Not one of these critics would have believed in 1968 that over 500,000 American troops could be withdrawn and that South Vietnam would still stand and defeat a massive invasion which few other countries in the world could have withstood even with the support of American air power. The Vietnamese have known all along that they were in for a long war and that their strategy and tactics had to be adjusted accordingly to keep casualties below a tolerance level which, if exceeded, might have affected morale throughout the Army....The best South Vietnamese generals understood this tolerance level very well, even though their critics in the American media did not. **Having seen quite a number of armies over the years I am prepared to state that ARVN is now second only to Israel in this type of modern warfare in the western world.**²⁹*

I am not at all certain if this writer can add anything to such a clear and perfectly delineated Thompson perspective; he covers some remarkable distance in this view from his 1966 through to 1974 publications on Vietnam.

Perhaps the outstanding question that remains is why should we pay any attention to Sir Robert Thompson's perspective on the ARVN – after all, even though he praised it as being "...second only to Israel" (i.e., the IDF/ZAHAL) it failed in the end and was destroyed by the Communists? The answer to this is complex; but, as any military historian worth the title knows, failure of an army, no matter how superb a fighting machine, is not that uncommon when it is subjected to continual political mishandling and over-stretch! In this context, one need look no further than the German Wehrmacht of World War Two; most military historians would agree that it was the finest modern war machine ever assembled and within five years of continual political misuse and over-stretch it was smashed to pieces by armies that had half the training or skill. So, was

²⁹ Ibid. pages: 168 - 169

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

ARVN on the same level as that mythical German martial war machine of the middle 20th century? Of course it was not – but through a turbulent long haul it became a very fine army at defending South Vietnam. This is a credit that is not often given its proper place in American histories of that war. Thompson's work always gave this credit where it was due along with his many criticisms of ARVN. One is never left with the sense that he left something out in his analysis and/or presented the reader with an incomplete picture. In short, Thompson's perspective has the ring of truth to it because it has balance. This balance is lacking in many US interpretations of ARVN and its war(s).

Therefore, Sir Robert Thompson's perspective is most useful to anyone wishing to analyze ARVN as an army in general and, as he pointed out, he was quite familiar with several armies – so his estimations were not based on lack of comparative knowledge in this area. On this general theme, this writer would add one thing further: Thompson's work on Counter-Insurgency warfare has been hailed as being in a class of its own; DEFEATING COMMUNIST INSURGENCY, originally published in 1966, has recently been republished in 2005 by an American company (Hailer Publishing, Florida, USA) as the demand by those charged with actually fighting an insurgency in Iraq, amongst other places, has been so sharp that many of the older copies are being pulled off book shelves at a rate that cannot be replaced. It has become self-evident that Thomson knew his business very well indeed as attested to by the many professional soldiers who are currently attempting to rapidly immerse their thinking in his principles in order to stave off the failure of a couple of very tricky insurgencies now being

ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.

countered in the Middle East. It would appear that the Thompson perspective has a long shelf life.

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ARVN: Perspectives from a British Counter-Insurgency Expert.