

## CHAPTER III

### The Regional and Popular Forces

#### *Evolution of a Concept*

During the first few years of its existence, South Vietnam wanted to maintain a military force composed primarily of volunteers. From the lessons learned during the 1946-1954 war, South Vietnamese military leaders believed that for the defense of their new nation to be effective, this military force should have the capabilities to maintain territorial security and fight a mobile war at the same time. Therefore, in addition to regular forces which were upgraded from mobile groups to infantry divisions in early 1955, they advocated the activation of local force regiments with men recruited locally. This concept was based on the simple logic that these men were intimately familiar with the geographical and social environment of their locality and, attached as they were by tradition to their native villages, they would be more dedicated to fight for their defense if the necessity should arise.

This concept was not shared by U.S. advisers of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) who maintained that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) should be a mobile ground force consisting primarily of draftees. They also disapproved of the local recruitment principle, fearing that this would make the ARVN less mobile. Our army, as a result, was reorganized along American conventional guidelines into four field divisions, and, as a measure of compromise, six light divisions, totaling 30 regular infantry regiments after ridding itself of all auxiliary force units. The four 8,600-man field divisions would be employed to confront an invasion from the North, conventional-style. The light divisions, with a strength of 5,245 each, were designed primarily to conduct mobile operations to suppress rebels and guerrillas and to support the field divisions. By 1958, however, the light divisions were

disbanded, for, as the Chief MAAG, Lt. General Samuel T. Williams observed, they were not capable of confronting regular North Vietnamese divisions. At that time, it appeared that South Vietnam's defense was based on the concept that the ARVN needed only to fight a delaying action during the initial stage of an invasion pending eventual intervention by the U.S. and SEATO forces. As a result, our ten divisions were transformed into seven standardized infantry divisions, conventionally organized, trained, and equipped to fight a conventional war. Preoccupied as it was with the task of preparing the ARVN for an eventual showdown with the North Vietnamese Army, MAAG took some interest in the problem of territorial security but in its view, this was a matter that the GVN should and could handle with its own resources.

When fighting finally broke out, it did not take the form of a conventional, Korean-style invasion. It rather began as a brush-fire war fought with subversive activities and guerrilla tactics away from the urban centers. Waged day and night, this small war gradually gained in tempo, nipping away at the secure fabric of rural areas. In the face of growing insurgency, ARVN units found themselves ill-fitted to fight this type of war for which they had not been trained.

In mid-1959, to meet the immediate requirements of beating Communist insurgents in their own game, the GVN activated 65 "special-action" companies, which later became known as Rangers. Acting without MAAG concurrence, the GVN was compelled to take away one company from each 4-company infantry battalion to provide the necessary manpower for the Ranger forces. By June the next year, however, MAAG was sold on the special warfare concept and agreed to support and train the Ranger companies.

To assist South Vietnam in meeting the growing Communist threat, a counter-insurgency plan was prepared for study in September 1960 under the supervision of Lieutenant General Lionel C. McGarr, the new Chief, MAAG. The objective of this plan was to check the expansion of insurgency by increasing South Vietnam's force structure. For the conduct of the war, the plan's basic concept advocated the division of South Vietnam's territory into tactical areas placed under military commands

appropriately structured and sufficiently strong to exercise effective control and supervision. Security in individual areas was to be maintained by ARVN units, Rangers and territorial forces acting in close coordination and cooperation. In February 1961, the completed counter-insurgency plan was approved. It provided basic guidelines for all subsequent planning and actions in the years ahead.

The territorial forces, whose employment figured in this counter-insurgency plan, were military organizations placed under the direct control of sector and subsector commanders to assure territorial security. Two principal components made up the territorial forces: the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps which eventually became the Regional and Popular Forces in 1964. The Regional Forces (RF) were basically organized into rifle companies augmented as required by a number of river boat companies, mechanized platoons, heavy-weapons platoons, reconnaissance units, administration and logistic support companies and elements of command and control. Although normally operating at the company level, the RF were capable of conducting multi-company operations. The Popular Forces, on the other hand, never progressed beyond the platoon, their basic unit or organization, which was conceived for combat in villages and hamlets. These forces were essentially infantry; their equipment and mode of subsistence were more austere than those of the RF.

The rules were thus established: the RF served the province and the PF, the district, but their goals remained essentially the same. There was no standard distribution of RF companies for each province. Their assigned number varied according to the size and population of the individual province and the priority placed on it. The same principle applied to the distribution of PF platoons for individual districts.

### *Background and Missions*

In their role as guardians of territorial security, the RF primary mission was to conduct operations against enemy local forces. The RF supported the PF in maintaining security for villages, and hamlets and protecting axes of communication, governmental installations, and the

economic infrastructure. Placed under the control of the sector commander, the RF occasionally performed operational missions at the multi-company level during relatively long periods of time. In many instances, the RF also served as a provincial reaction force. In addition, the RF were employed in the defense of outposts or combat bases located in relatively insecure areas.

The RF were originally a para-military force, called the Civil Guard (CG), which was activated in April 1955 with elements of the Vietnamese National Army, French Union Forces, and auxiliary forces (Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, UMD, etc.), disbanded or discharged as a result of a MAAG-imposed force structure ceiling. The Civil Guard eventually absorbed 68,000 of these men and was organized into separate companies assigned to provinces on the basis of two or eight companies per province. In addition, there were eight battalions of 500 men each held in reserve.

The Civil Guard Directorate at the central level was under the Ministry of the Interior, and there were Civil Guard Offices at the province level. Both echelons were charged with administration, finance, personnel, training, and logistic support. All expenses incurred by the maintenance and operation of the Civil Guard were covered by the national budget. To help defray equipment costs, the GVN turned to some allied countries besides the U.S., such as Malaysia and Australia, for assistance. As a result, in addition to a hodgepodge of old weapons left behind by French forces, the Civil Guard was also equipped with vintage Ford Lynx armored vehicles and scout cars provided by Malaysia, and Land Rover trucks and radio equipment donated by Australia.

The Popular Forces were primarily employed as security forces for villages and hamlets to defend against local enemy guerrillas. They were also deployed to guard axes of communication and fixed installations, man outposts, conduct patrols, gather intelligence, and lay ambushes within the boundaries of the district. They were controlled either by the district or the village chief.



RF Soldiers Patrolling a Village



PF Soldiers Awaiting Orders to Move Out

Popular Forces had a background similar to that of the RF. They came primarily from the Self-Defense Corps (SDC), a 48,000-man paramilitary force which was created in 1956 under the Ministry of the Interior. Originally, the Self-Defense Corps was an organization of village militia whose basic unit was a cell or team varying in strength from four to ten men per village having a population in excess of 1,000. The village militia cell or team performed security duties such as guard and patrol under the control of the village or hamlet chief. Militiamen were issued weapons only when taking up guard or patrol duty; these weapons were locked up in the village administrative office. At the end of each shift of duty, they went about their normal business or trade but kept an eye on village activities and reported abnormalities.

As village militiamen, Self-Defense Corps members did not have government-issued uniforms; they went on duty wearing whatever clothes were appropriate for everyday living. By and large, however, black pajamas were the most popular attire since they were traditional for South Vietnamese peasants and cheap and easy to maintain.

Unlike the Civil Guard whose command system stopped at the province level, the Self-Defense Corps organizational structure existed at every administrative echelon down to the village. At the central level, there was the Self-Defense Corps Directorate; at the province level, the SDC office; at the district level, the SDC section; and there was an SDC commissioner for every village. The village SDC cell or team was issued obsolescent rifles and shotguns. To complement this armament, SDC members produced their own booby traps rigged with poisoned spikes or arrows for the defense of the village or hamlet. Their means of communications and alert were primarily drums, tocsins, flag signals, and messengers. All operational expenses for the SDC were funded by the provincial budget. Provinces with limited budgetary resources received assistance from the central government.

## *Organization and Force Development*

From their inception to 1960, both the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were neither adequately equipped nor organized and controlled to accomplish their missions in a satisfactory manner. This derived in good part from the lack of U.S. support. South Vietnamese and U.S. viewpoints differed greatly as to the role and significance assigned to these forces. It was South Vietnam's desire to turn the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps into strong territorial forces capable of assisting the regular ARVN in defense missions. Therefore, the Civil Guard in particular should be organized into battalions and regimental-size units, sufficiently equipped and armed to defeat enemy local forces. The U.S. saw it differently, however. As expressed through the Civil Guard training program developed by the Michigan State University (MSU) group, the U.S. considered the CG nothing more than a rural police force and neither the CG nor the SDC was supported by the Military Assistance Program (MAP).

Beginning in 1960, however, as insurgent activities became a serious threat for South Vietnam, the U.S. expended significant efforts to develop and increase the combat effectiveness of these forces. To facilitate U.S. support procedures, in December 1960, the GVN promulgated a decree placing the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps under the Ministry of Defense. On this legal ground, MAAG began to provide advisers to work with the Civil Guard Directorate in matters concerning training and equipment. Expenditures for the CG, however, were funded by the U.S. International Cooperation Administration (ICA). In 1961 MAAG funding covered both forces.

To improve command and control, the Self-Defense Corps Directorate and its provincial and district offices were disbanded and fused with the Civil Guard command structure. At the Central level, the Civil Guard Directorate was redesignated Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps General Directorate, and at the province level the same integration process was accomplished; the province CG and SDC office now administered both forces. This was a significant step toward unity of command.



At the same time, the Self-Defense Corps structure was upgraded. Each hamlet was assigned a SDC squad and each village, a SDC platoon. SDC squads and platoons were now issued weapons and became full-time combatants just like the Civil Guard. SDC members were also issued black uniforms and black caps procured locally by the Civil Guard supply system. New recruits for the SDC were assembled into units and sent to provincial training centers which had been installed in 26 provinces across the country. Instead of allowances, SDC troopers now drew regular pay just like their Civil Guard colleagues although at a lower scale.

Despite the fact that the CG and SDC now operated under the Ministry of Defense and benefited from the U.S. Military Assistance Program, they were not part of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). The CG and SDC forces, therefore, received no support from the RVNAF although they performed increasingly difficult missions combating the Viet Cong and suffered the same hardship and dangers as the regular ARVN. As a consequence, they fared very poorly by comparison, especially in training, logistic support, and command and leadership. Still, with MAAG support, the CG and SDC made substantial progress. There were no objective criteria for measuring the improvements in the territorial forces, but regional commanders and other officials noted greater efficiency in the performance of SDC and CG daily activities, and in the discipline and morale of the troops.

In 1964, the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were integrated into the RVNAF and became the Regional Forces (RF) and Popular Forces (PF) under the command of the Joint General Staff. The CG and SDC General Directorate became the RF and PF Command subordinate to the JGS and in charge of administration and support. At the province level, the CG and SDC office was disbanded and absorbed into the sector headquarters as a staff element in charge of the RF and PF. Administration, finance services and logistic support for all RF and PF units in the province were provided by the newly-created Administration and Logistic Support (ALS) company. Each province was assigned one or two such companies depending on the RF-PF strength to be supported. Training for the RF and PF was assumed by the Central Training Command with a

view to unify training policies and make maximum use of training facilities. But this division of responsibilities diluted the total effort designed to improve the RF-PF effectiveness. In October 1964, acting on a MACV recommendation, the JGS turned over training responsibilities to the RF and PF Command to ensure full integration of efforts within its system.

By 1966, the gradual expansion and modernization of the RVNAF, especially the RF and PF, made it imperative that the JGS unify command and standardize support functions for pacification. Besides, the existence of a separate command, although nominally subordinated to the JGS, created problems of command and leadership. As a result, in September 1966, the RF and PF Command was disbanded and its personnel integrated into the JGS organization. An assistant for RF and PF was appointed to assist the chief of the JGS in matters concerning the territorial forces. At the same time, a permanent committee for the improvement of the RF and PF was designated to include members of the JGS staff divisions and functional commands. Its mission was to monitor and coordinate all activities related to the organization, employment, personnel administration, training, inspection, logistic support and indoctrination of the RF and PF.

At the Corps/CTZ level, an Assistant Corps Commander for RF and PF was appointed to monitor and supervise the performance of these forces through the Corps/CTZ staff.<sup>1</sup> A regional committee for the improvement of the RF and PF was also created with functions similar to those of the central committee. With this new arrangement, the RVNAF had a truly unified command structure reaching down to the sector and subsector level. Within this structure, the CTZ and sector commands played the most important role as far as the improvement of the territorial forces was concerned. They monitored and supervised every aspect of it, from

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<sup>1</sup> Assistants for RF-PF at the JGS and Corps level also served as territorial force commanders. At the province level, the sector commander was RF-PF commander. When the RF and PF were integrated into the ARVN in October 1970 as part of its infantry forces, the positions of RF-PF commanders were also abolished.

recruiting and tactical employment to administration and logistic support. (*Chart 1*)

By late 1966, the RF organization was standardized at the separate company level, the eight RF battalions had been deactivated, and the Popular Forces were organized into standard platoons. (*Charts 2 and 3*) This standardization and consolidation process was also enforced in other aspects. In each province, there was only a single, consolidated company responsible for all support activities for the RF and PF. The PF black uniform was discarded in favor of the standard olive green and khaki uniforms of the ARVN infantry. Gradually, in their outlook, deportment, and combat performance, the RF and PF troopers shed their para-military origins and increasingly became full-fledged soldiers. (*Chart 4*)

These advances in the status and capabilities of the RF and PF were not without American interest, assistance and support. In fact, in October 1967, General Abrams then Deputy Commander, MACV, directed a MACV staff and U.S. field command study to find ways to improve the combat effectiveness of the territorial forces. In the summer of that year, the advisory responsibility for RF and PF had already been consolidated in the office of the MACV deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). This was a change that greatly improved the coordination of all U.S. efforts in pacification support and had a direct beneficial effect on territorial forces.

As a consequence of the MACV and CORDS interest in the territorials, and a result of General Abrams' study, mobile training teams were organized and by mid-1968 were engaged in training territorials in the field.

With American support, the RF force structure constantly expanded, from 888 companies in 1967 to 1,119 in 1968 and 1,471 in 1969. This expansion, coupled with stepped up combat activities, brought about problems for the sector and subsector headquarters as far as operational control was concerned. To improve this control, RF company-group headquarters were activated beginning in 1969. Each group headquarters was capable of exercising operational control over two to five RF companies in combat missions. (*Chart 5*)

Chart 1 – RVNAF Organization for Territorial Control

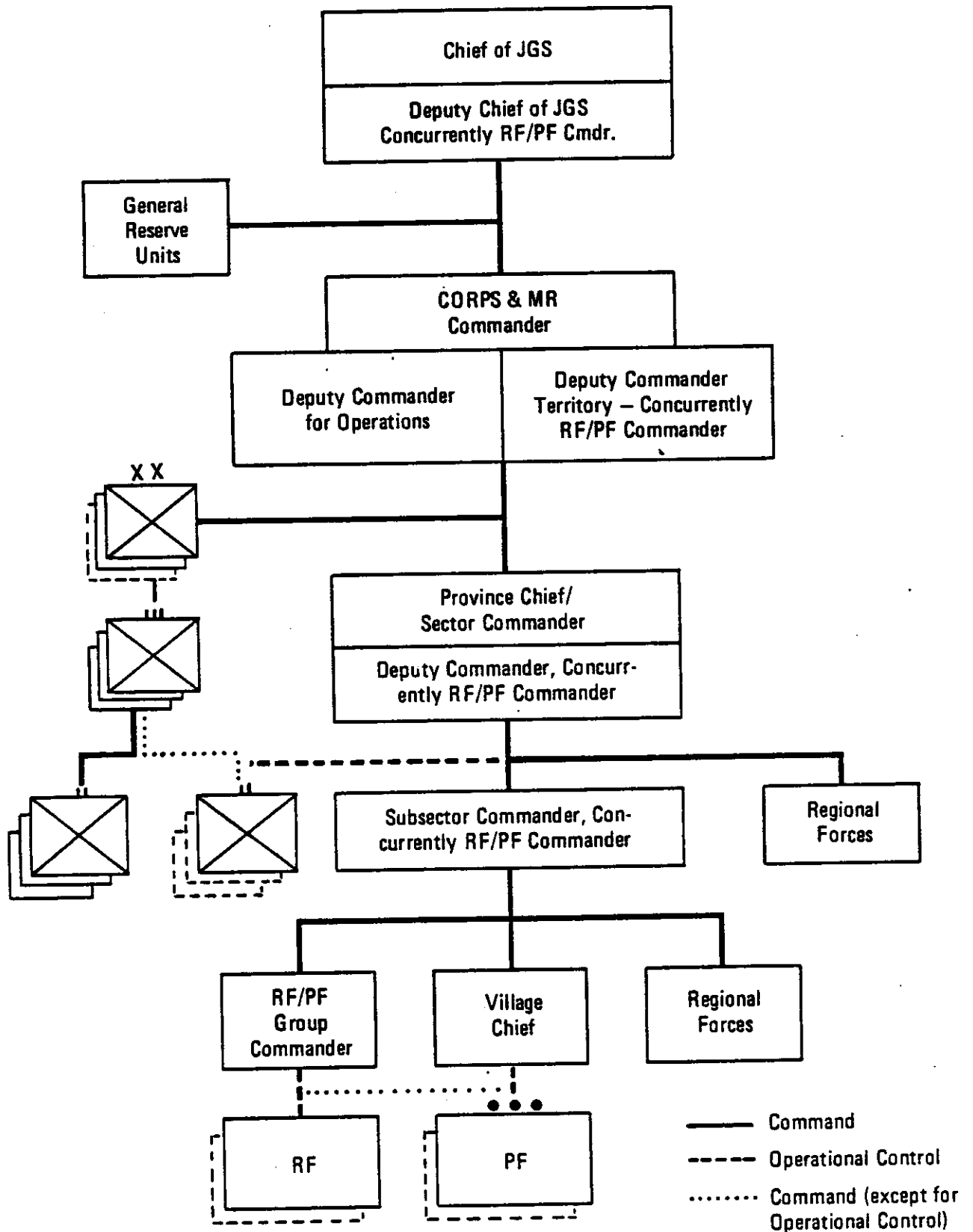


Chart 2 -- Organization, RF Company (Separate)

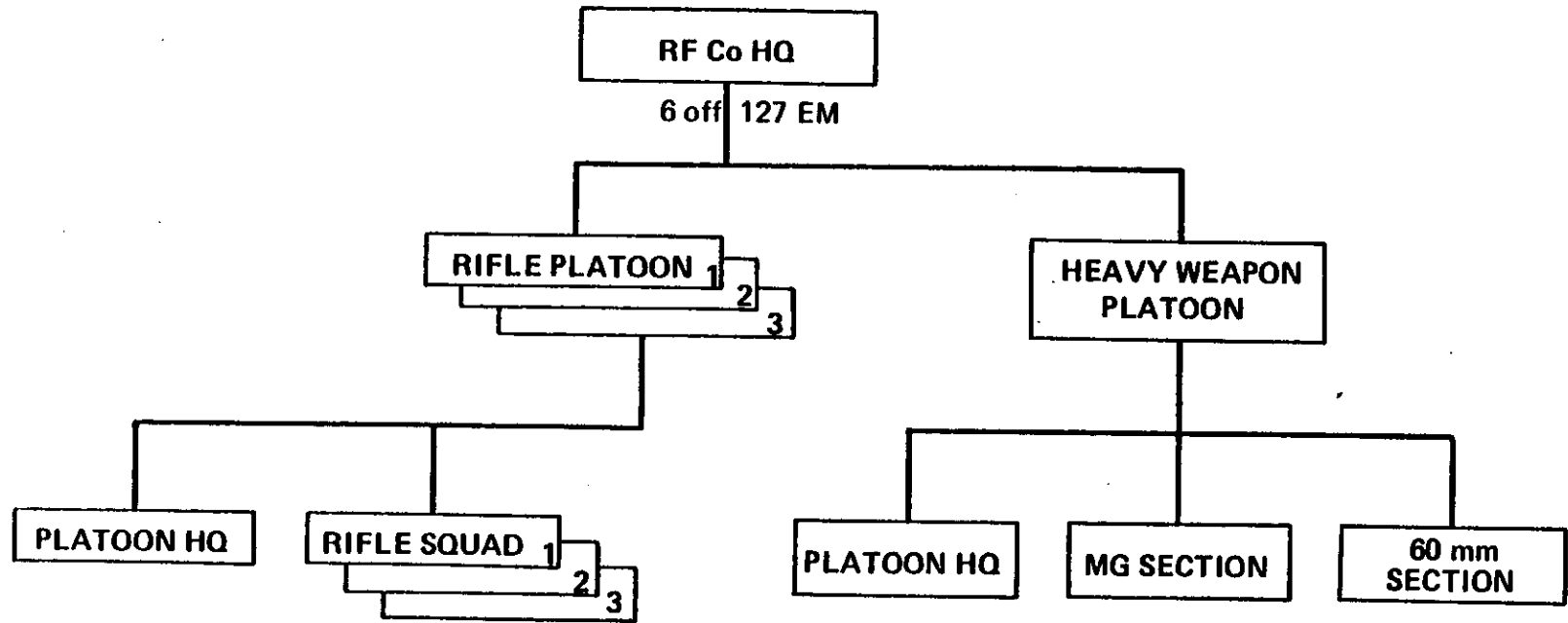


Chart 3 – Organization, PF Platoon

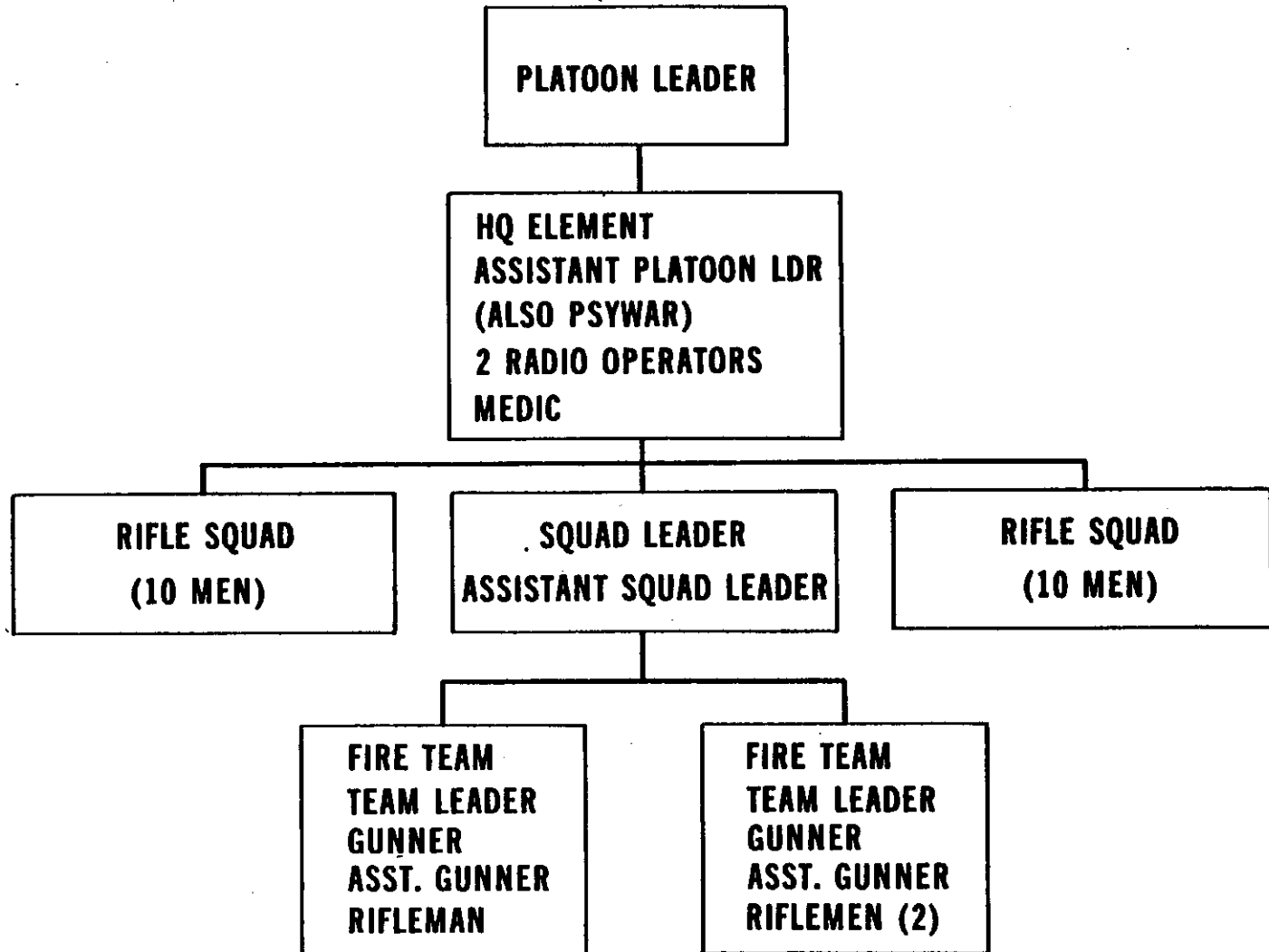
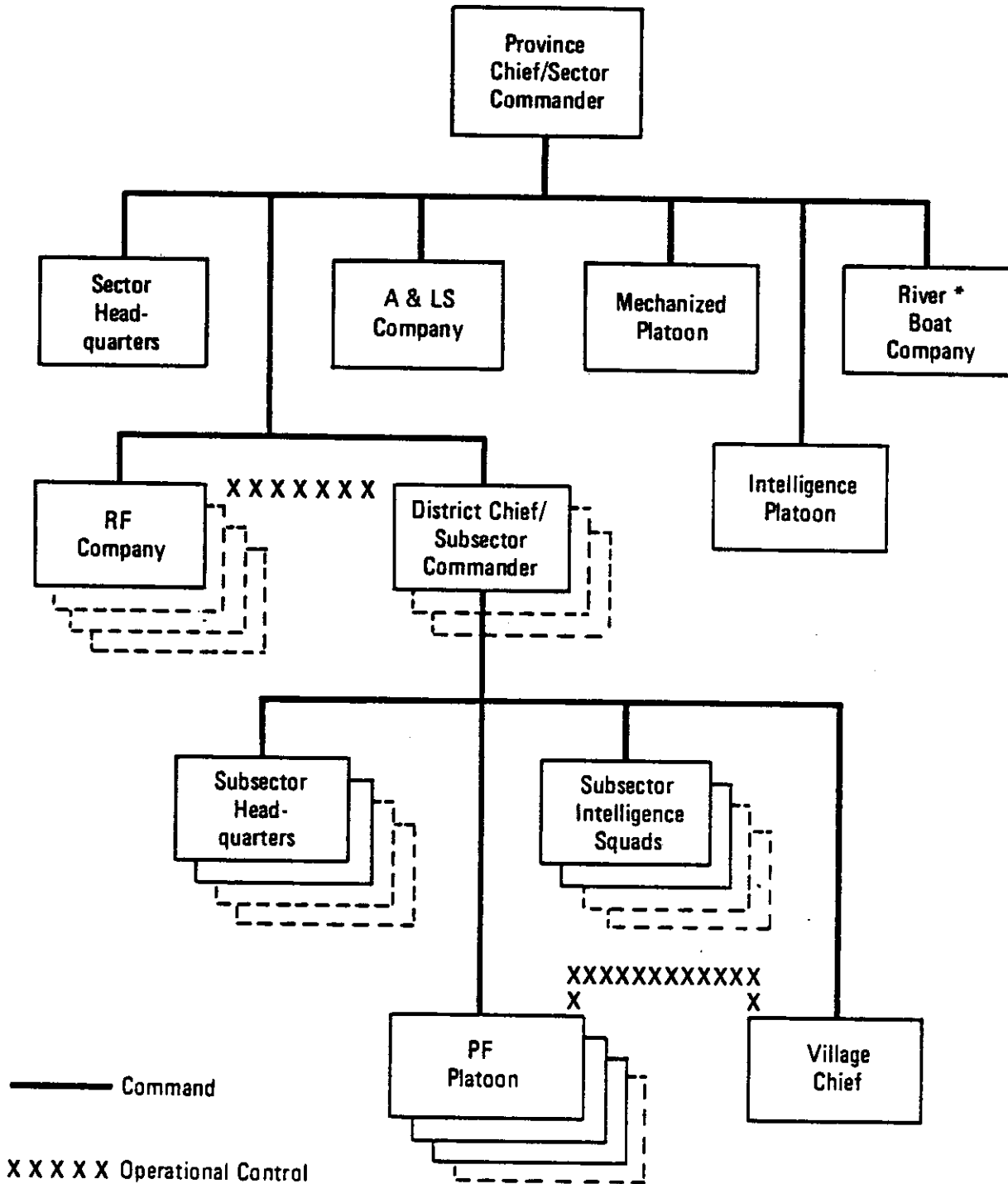
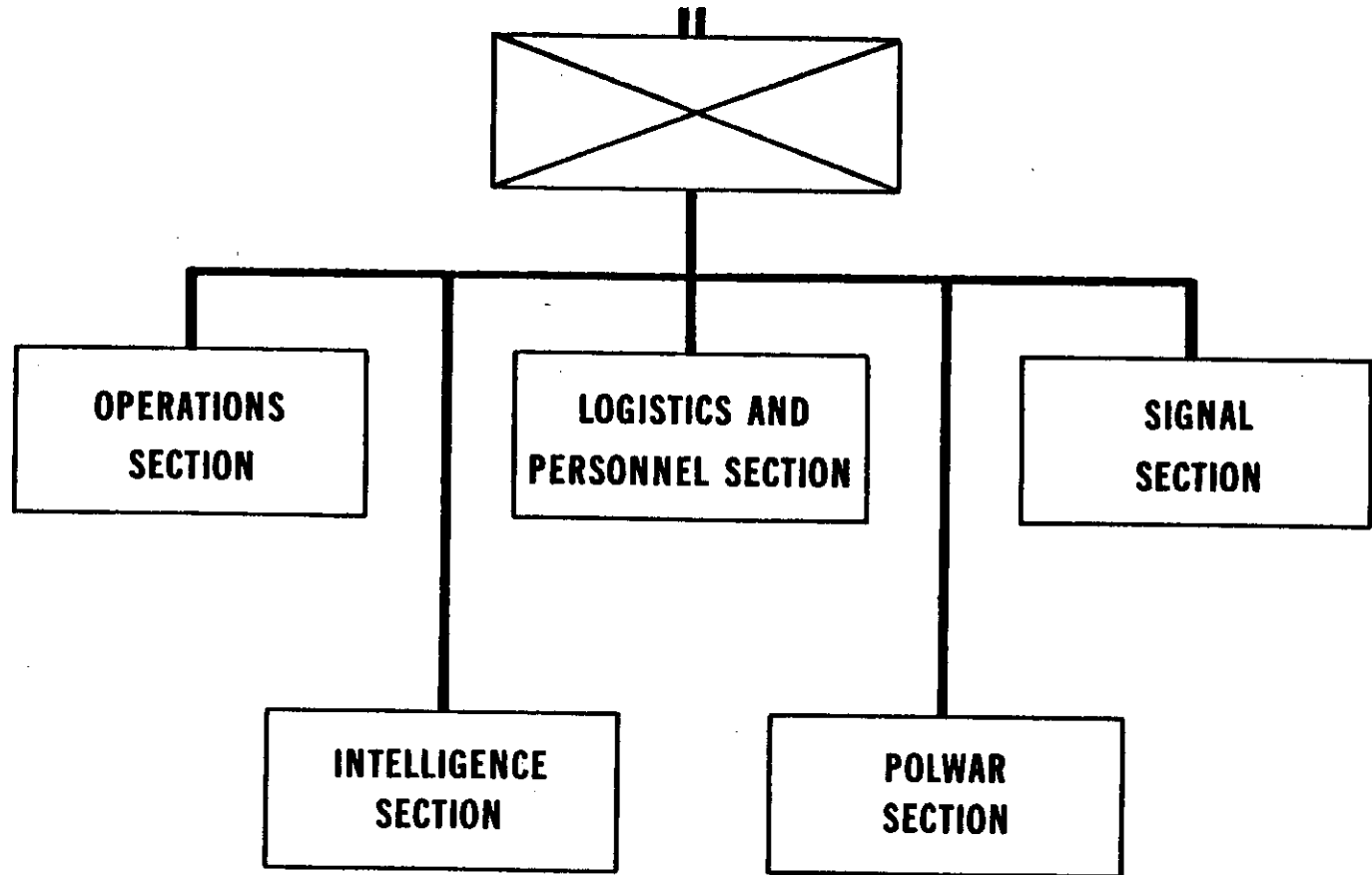


Chart 4 – RF/PF Organization within a Province/Sector



\* Not found in all Provinces

Chart 5 – Organization, Headquarters, RF Company Group





During 1969, RF companies were also experimentally grouped into battalions for the purpose of testing their capabilities for mobile operations within a province. This effort was occasioned by the fact that enemy local forces had upgraded their activities to battalion and occasionally, regimental level. By the end of June, 1970, there were a total of 31 RF battalions and 232 RF company groups thus formed.

During the same year, to meet growing support requirements occasioned by the accelerated pacification effort, the sector ALS company was given additional support responsibilities. In addition to supporting the expanding RF and PF, the ALS companies were also to provide supplies and 2d echelon maintenance in weapons, signal equipment, and vehicles for the Revolutionary Development (RD) cadre teams, which totalled 50,000 men in 1970, for the People's Self-Defense Forces with 400,000 individual weapons, for about 84 armed propaganda teams, and for a host of separate ARVN elements on permanent assignment or TDY at the sector level. The magnitude of tasks and services performed and the requirements in support personnel far outgrew the size of a consolidated company. Therefore, the ALS companies were expanded and upgraded into ALS Centers organized into five different configurations to accommodate the varying support needs of different provinces in terms of troop and equipment density. (*Chart 6*)

Encouraged by the performance of RF battalions in mobile combat operations, the JGS gradually transformed company group headquarters into full-fledged battalion headquarters. (*Chart 7*) By 1973, a total of 360 RF battalions had thus been formed and fully employed. The success of this plan and the necessity of freeing ARVN infantry divisions for mobile combat missions in replacement of U.S. major units which by this time had been withdrawn, urged the JGS to take a further step in upgrading the RF. In the JGS's view, if RF battalions could be grouped into regiments or brigades, they would certainly be able to take over the major responsibility of supporting pacification which ARVN infantry divisions now assumed. Strategically, this would make the conduct of the war much more effective since the type of warfare now being fought had become increasingly large-scale and conventional.

The idea was subjected to extensive debates but finally it was deemed unfeasible for two reasons: lack of competent cadre and lack

Chart 6 – Organization, Sector ALS Center

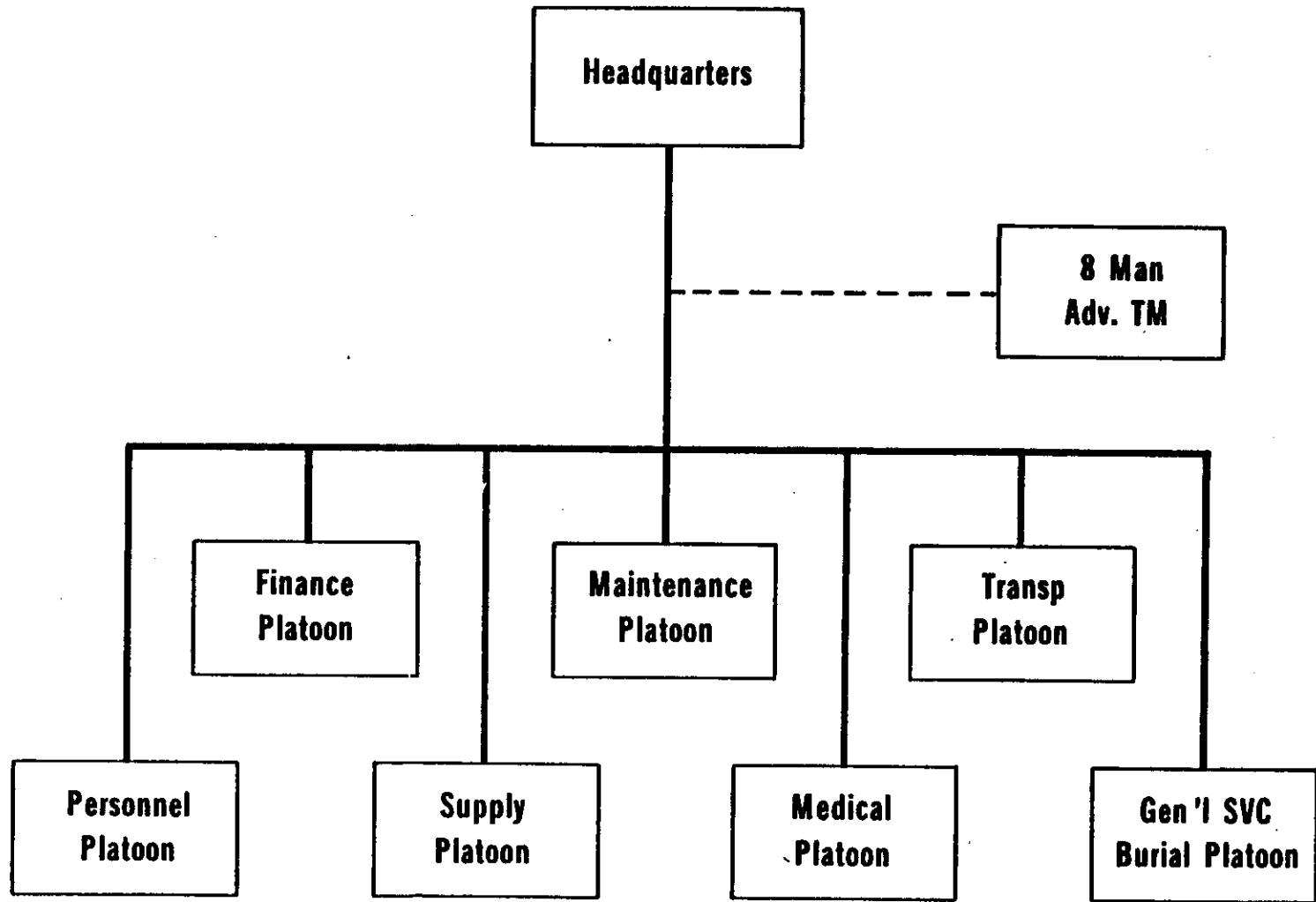
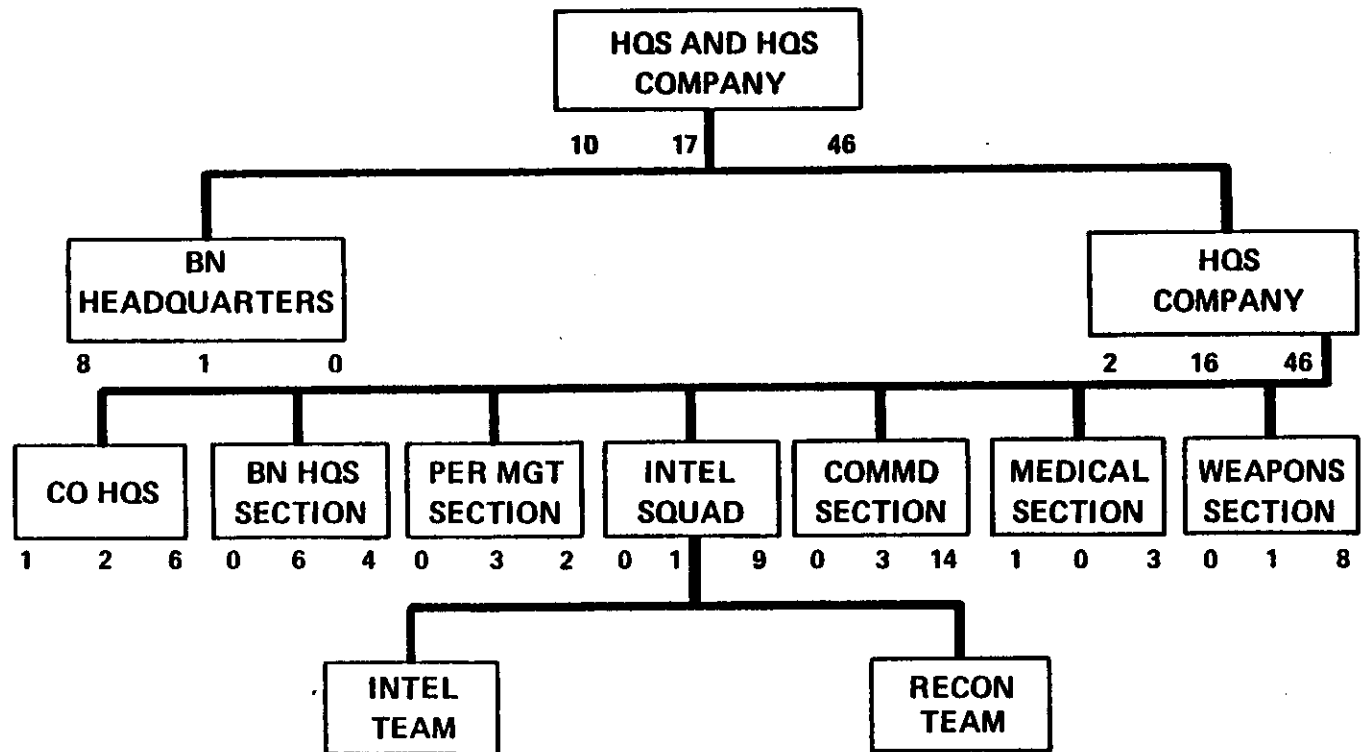


Chart 7 – Organization, Hq and Hq Company, RF Battalion

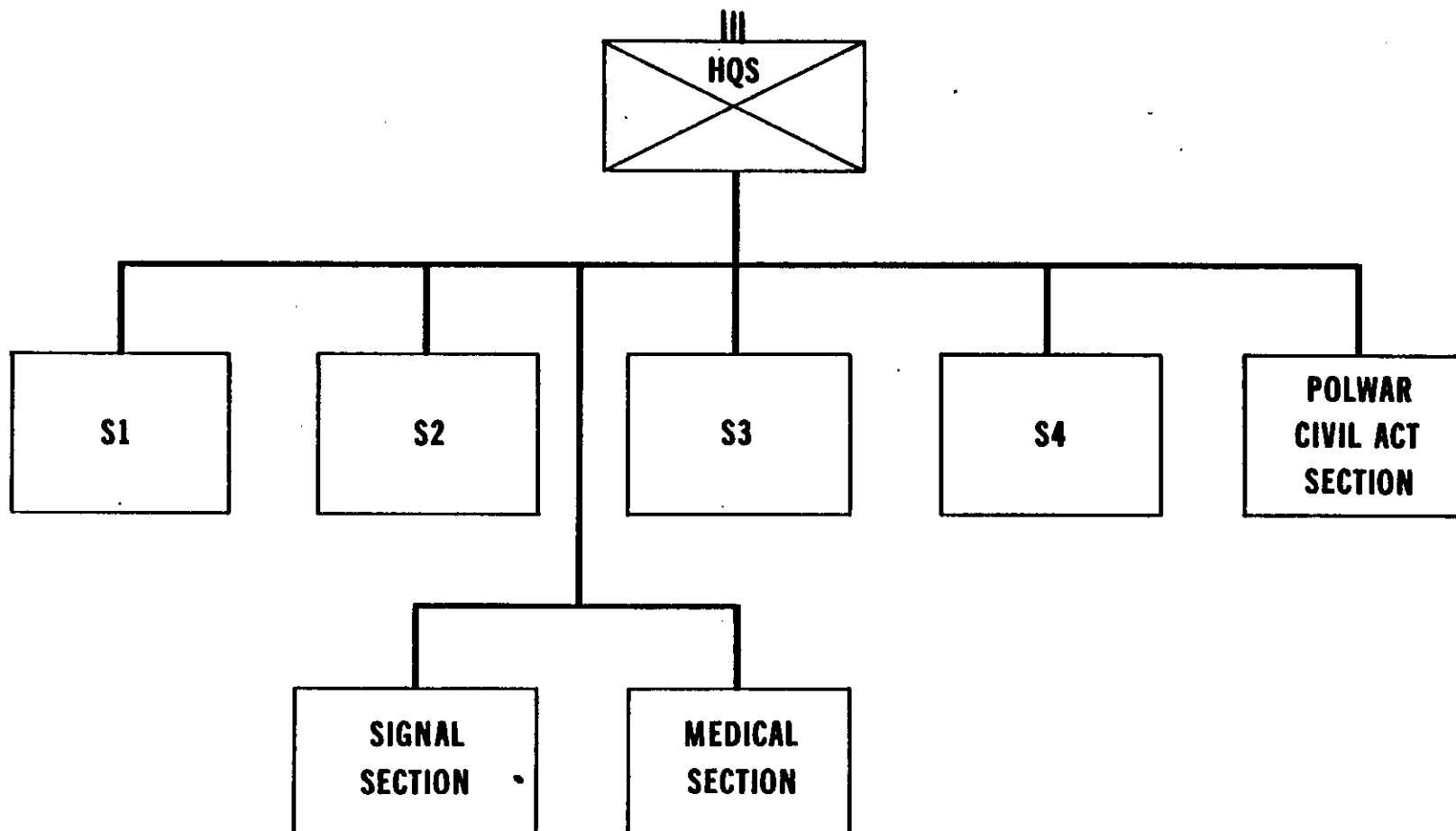


of funds for additional equipment. In the meantime, to improve operational control capabilities for the sector and also to alleviate the combat burdens for its headquarters, the concept of Sector Tactical Headquarters, a more economical approach to the same idea, was implemented. In each sector, in addition to its regular (fixed) headquarters, there was created a tactical headquarters which consisted of a staff and supporting units such as a political warfare and civil action platoon, a signal platoon and a medical platoon. The sector tactical headquarters was capable of controlling from two to five RF battalions in combat, and monitoring all security and pacification activities in the province. (Chart 8) For large provinces with a greater number of RF battalions and where enemy pressure was particularly heavy such as Kien Hoa, Binh Dinh, and Quang Nam, two tactical headquarters had been activated and were fully operational.

By late 1974, stepped up war activities by NVA main force units, especially in MR-1, and the GVN policy dictates of maintaining territorial integrity had edged our ARVN infantry divisions into a situation of overextension for static defense from which they could hardly extricate without replacement forces. The protracted commitment in MR-1 of our only two general reserve divisions made South Vietnam's defense posture look even worse in the face of the constant enemy buildup along the western border. Within each province, there was an urgent need for a strong, mobile strike force to confront enemy local forces because regular reinforcements from MR headquarters were difficult and often impossible to obtain. Each of our ARVN corps, with all of its units committed and overextended, also felt the need for a mobile reserve force which could be used to assist infantry divisions in facing serious tactical situations, and in case of heavy losses, as replacement units.

These requirements led to the activation of RF mobile groups, still a makeshift solution in view of U.S. aid constraints, but responsive enough to warrant their expedient formation. Each RF mobile group was nothing more than a permanent assemblage of the existing sector tactical headquarters and RF battalions plus some organic artillery support. Oddly enough, its composition very nearly matched the old French Groupe Mobile (GM) of the First Indochina War: a tactical headquarters with the same

Chart 8 – Organization, Sector Tactical Headquarters



support units, except for the polwar platoon, three infantry battalions (RF), and a battery of four 105-mm howitzers. The RF mobile group was thus made capable of self-sustained combat operations and since it was not bound by sector boundaries, could be used to reinforce infantry divisions as required within the MR.

The JGS planning called for 27 such RF mobile groups to be activated beginning in January 1975. By 30 April, seven had become operational and employed extensively in MR-3 and MR-4. The process of RF organization and force development ended with this final concept.

From their inception to the very last days of the war, the RF and PF almost always made up more than one half of the total RVNAF strength. Their combined strength naturally exceeded that of all regular infantry forces. At their latest stage of development, the RF numbered about 312,000, distributed among 1,810 rifle companies, 24 river boat companies, 51 mechanized platoons (V-100) and logistic support and staff elements. The PF numbered somewhat less, 220,800 in total, broken down into 7,968 platoons. Over the years, these territorial forces had become the subject of constant study and exchanges between the JGS and MACV.

In terms of unit organizations, the RF progressed from separate companies to company groups, battalions and finally mobile groups. This gradual upgrading into larger units somehow deprived the RF of their local character but it was dictated by South Vietnam's growing force requirements and the changing nature of the war, especially during the later stages.

Almost every military authority, especially South Vietnamese, agreed that these trends in RF organizational and force development responded to the requirements of the war. While agreeing, some thought that the activation of RF regimental-size units came rather belatedly. They believed that this should have been done in 1971, when most U.S. infantry divisions had been withdrawn and the enemy was grouping his local forces into battalions and regiments and preparing for mobile conventional warfare. I agree with this opinion. If we had achieved this at that time, then ARVN infantry divisions would not have found themselves overextended when replacing U.S. units being redeployed. They could have become more mobile and would have constituted a formidable deterrent to invasion.

Then the problem of general reserves and corps reserves would have been solved or at least been less acute. If such had been our military posture, I believe that North Vietnam would have been less inclined to conduct a full-scale invasion as in 1972 and 1975, even without U.S. military presence.

While there was almost total agreement on the RF and PF organization and force development trends, opinions seemed to differ widely as to their command and control. This problem seemed to have no easy solution because it dealt with a gigantic force without a strong backbone. With and precisely because of this flexibility, no single option would be entirely satisfactory.

A school of thought maintained that there should have been a vertical RF-PF command and control system from the central to the district level. At the central level, there should be a RF-PF command, subordinate to the JGS like other service branch or combat arm commands, and responsible to it for all matters concerning the RF and PF. This had been our system during 1964 and 1966. This same line of thought would like to see a RF and PF command at the military region, sector and sub-sector level, subordinated to each related headquarters operationally. All of these RF-PF commands should be responsible for four main areas of activity: combat operations, training, personnel administration, and logistic support.

A similar opinion agreed with this separate RF-PF command and control structure but felt that operational control of the RF and PF should be a responsibility of territorial commands (MR, sector, subsector). Still another idea, while also advocating the same separate command structure, believed that to be more effective, logistic support functions at the central and military region levels should be handled by respective RVNAF logistics commands. In that case, the RF-PF commands would be responsible only for personnel administration and training. A variant of this opinion maintained that training functions, too, should be handled by the Central Training Command, thus reducing RF-PF commands at central and regional levels to simple administrative offices. The one thing that all of these opinions seemed to have in common was that

operational control of the RF and PF should be placed under territorial commands.

Another school of thought believed that there should not be a separate RF-PF command except at the sector level since this was where the territorial forces were employed. This school of thought envisioned that the RF-PF commander would double as deputy or chief of staff for the sector commander.

A final school of thought, which was predicated on the proven principles of unity of command and economy of force, rigorously precluded any separate command and control system for the RF and PF. Its irrefutable argument was that all functions, no matter how trivial or important, were command responsibilities which should not be assumed by anyone other than the territorial commander. There should only be a single, unified staff at each echelon of territorial command to assist the commander. If RF and PF matters were too burdensome or needed special command attention, then the commander could always appoint a deputy or assistant especially in charge of these forces.

Of all these schools of thought, only the last one had special merits; not only did it respect the unity of command principle, it was also more compatible with RVNAF limited resources, especially in command cadre and support assets. This was precisely the approach to command and control that the JGS had used since 1967 to deal with the RF and PF. The system's only shortcomings were those found mostly at the sector level such as abuse of authority, lack of control and supervision, and negligence. Their cause, however, was primarily one of inexperience and bad leadership on the part of the sector commander and his staff. Another reason was the fact that an overburdened province chief, who also doubled as sector commander, could not spare enough time and energy to care for his troops. There were, moreover, too many RF-PF units under his responsibility for effective control. This latter shortcoming was remedied in part by upgrading the RF into bigger units and creating sub-subsector (village) commands, which helped alleviate some of the province chief's command responsibilities as regards personnel administration, training, combat, and support.



## *Recruitment and Administration*

From their inception the RF and PF procured their manpower through recruitment and conscription. This manpower came primarily from two sources: discharged RVNAF servicemen, and civilian youths not falling into the draft age class (20-22 for the period prior to 1964). Those in this age class were obligated to do their military service for a mandatory period of time (usually 2 years) and could volunteer to serve in the RF or PF only after discharge.

Until 1960, recruitment for the RF and PF did not have any significant difficulties. But beginning in 1961, it ran into increasing competition with recruiting efforts of the regular forces which sought to complement their quotas of draftees to meet expansion requirements. The RF and PF lost in this competition; their lower pay and enlistment bonus did not attract enough volunteers. To provide the manpower required by the RF-PF force structure expansion, many province chiefs resorted to recruiting outsiders, people from other provinces. They found that personnel resources were usually abundant in Vinh Binh and Ba Xuyen Provinces with their large Khmer communities or those provinces with large numbers of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai followers (Chau Doc, Long Xuyen, Phong Dinh, Tay Ninh). The recruiting task was usually assigned to teams, each responsible for procuring enough men for a company.

By 1964, the extended draft age (20-25) made it seemingly harder for the RF and PF to recruit. However, their recruitment was assisted by police operations which sought to track down draft evaders and deserters. Volunteers for service in the RF and PF also became more numerous especially among those youths 23, 24, and 25 years of age who made up the standby draft age classes. Their incentive for enlistment came from an ardent desire to stay near their hometowns and families; service in the RF or PF was their only chance. At the same time, draft evaders and deserters, fearful of being convicted if caught or weary of living as fugitives, sought ways to enlist in the RF and PF. They

did this by procuring for themselves new identification papers, legally or illegally.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in 1965, RF and PF recruitment became more successful, primarily because of readjusted pay scales and other newly-instituted allowances. The RF soldier now earned about the same as an ARVN soldier, including family allowances. The PF soldier's contractual pay, usually a fixed indemnity, also doubled. In addition, both the RF and PF soldiers enjoyed the privilege of serving in their hometowns or villages. Enlistment in the RF and PF received a further boost, when in September 1966, new recruits were awarded the same enlistment or reenlistment bonus that only ARVN recruits had enjoyed.

From 1965 to 1967 the government of Vietnam was too unstable to attempt a general mobilization -- the opposition to such a move was strong and vocal -- but the government did manage to promulgate several incremental steps to extend the upper limit of draft age to 30. This again benefited the RF and PF as those youths likely to be called up next usually beat the draft by enlisting in the territorial forces.

Following the Communist offensive of Tet 1968, the climate was right for general mobilization. Not only were the Americans pushing for it, but the country's politicians and people were ready for it. President Thieu visited Hue in June of that year, together with prominent members of the national assembly, and signed the proclamation of general mobilization during a public ceremony. The event was greeted with resounding applause by the people of Hue and welcomed by the entire population.

With the promulgation of the General Mobilization Law in June 1968, every male citizen between 18 and 38 became eligible for mandatory service in the RVNAF, including RF and PF troopers. An exception was made,

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<sup>2</sup>Although a criminal act, the changing of personal identification was seldom detectable and inevitable in a country at war. Papers could be lost, destroyed or confiscated by the enemy. Even official records of birth, usually locally kept, were occasionally destroyed by acts of war. As a result, anyone could petition for and obtain a "writ in lieu of birth certificate" from a court of appeals. Counterfeit identification papers were less common.

however, for those between 31 and 38 who volunteered to serve in the RF or PF. It was this measure which helped boost RF and PF recruitment to unprecedented levels. By the end of 1968, total RF strength had exceeded its authorized level by a large margin (219,000 against 185,873). The same was also true of PF strength, although the excess margin was smaller (173,500 against 167,640). As a result, the activation of additional RF companies and PF platoons to meet expanding pacification requirements went smoothly according to plans during the following years.

Still, in some provinces, RF and PF recruitment among the age classes of 17 and from 31 to 38 did not fare as well as in others. It was as though manpower resources in these provinces had dried up. To assist them with manpower problems, beginning in 1970, the JGS approved a special measure allowing these sectors to recruit among the draft age classes (from 18 to 30) within a limited time, based on recommendations from MR headquarters. As a last resort, this measure was reluctantly taken because the JGS was fully aware that by doing so, it tacitly condoned draft evasion and desertion. In fact, experience revealed, that almost all of those recruited in the RF and PF who fell between these draft age limits were either draft evaders, illegal deferments and exempts, or deserters. As such, they should have all been arrested and prosecuted by military tribunals. But somehow they managed to stay free in defiance of the law. Obviously, this was possible only because local authorities had chosen to look the other way. Bribery was apparently one of the causes for this irregularity but, in the final analysis, perhaps local authorities believed it not worthwhile to enforce a law which meted out only a few months of imprisonment for those convicted. After all, convicted or not, they would eventually end up either in the military or in enemy hands. It was much better to accept them in the service and have additional combatants than lose them to the enemy.

This was the rationale for recruiting draft evaders and deserters instead of prosecuting them as criminals. Still, for the whole affair to look legal, the JGS always insisted on their having "legal draft status" as a matter of formality, when it authorized recruitment. As a matter of expediency, sector recruitment offices obliged by giving recruits hints on how to obtain "legal" papers which were readily accepted

for recruitment purposes until the day such papers were detected as illegal. In practice, the illegality of these papers was almost never challenged because local authorities believed that it would serve no useful purpose. Usually, only when claims were filed by inheritors to collect death gratuities did this illegality surface but then, for humanitarian reasons, the Ministry of Defense always authorized a "readjustment" to legal status.

Aside from recruitment, the RF and PF had constant problems with leadership which were no less complicated considering their heterogeneous origins. The Regional Forces, then Civil Guard, were initially made up of veterans of the Vietnamese National Army and French Union Forces who were discharged as a result of the 1955 force structure reduction. Civil Guard cadres then consisted of former career officers and NCOs who were allowed to retain their rank. Although combat experienced, the majority of these cadres had not received any formal training. The problem was compounded by special recruitment procedures during 1961-62 which granted assimilated officer and NCO ranks to teams of recruiters and then used them as cadres for companies they had helped recruit. Almost all of these cadres had no training or combat experience except for a few who had served in French forces as auxiliary troops.

During that same period, the Civil Guard Directorate recruited a small number of youths with a junior high-school educational level, sent them to a platoon leader course at Thu Duc, and graduated them with a second lieutenant commission while the same trainees for the regular ARVN were graduated with the rank of "aspirant" only. But most of these new officers were assigned to staff jobs at the central and provincial level. In addition, the Civil Guard also received on temporary duty a small number of ARVN officers who assumed key command and staff positions in the CG Directorate and provincial offices.

When the Civil Guard was redesignated Regional Forces and became an organic component of the RVNAF in 1965, the first step taken by the JGS was to immediately improve the RF cadre ranks. Refresher officer and NCO courses conducted at Thu Duc and the Quang Trung Training Center became mandatory for all RF cadres of assimilated ranks who had not received any

basic infantry officer or NCO training. Depending on graduating grades, these cadres would be either allowed to retain their ranks or demoted. This measure initially caused some hard feelings but not enough to undermine military discipline and morale. As a matter of fact, almost all RF cadres who attended refresher courses were able to retain their ranks upon graduation. At the same time, those youths who volunteered to serve the RF were encouraged and accepted for training as officers or NCOs if they met educational criteria. Special officer and NCO courses were also conducted for the benefit of combat experienced RF enlisted men who had leadership qualities but not enough formal education to qualify for regular courses.

The RF promotion system, long a stumbling block for the career advancement of RF cadres, was radically changed in 1966 when it instituted annual (regular) and battle (special) promotions which had only been available to our regular forces. Despite this and continued training, RF ranks were unable to produce enough cadres to meet increasing requirements, especially beginning in 1967 when pacification received national emphasis.

There was, therefore, an increasing demand for regular force officers and NCOs to be transferred to the RF on an extended, attached basis, and this trend was growing every year. During 1965, only 878 ARVN officers were attached to the RF; this number increased to 3,376 by 1968. The next two years saw unprecedented numbers of ARVN officers transferred to the RF; the transfer was in effect so extensive that by 1970, they outnumbered RF officers by a large margin (10,800 against 8,592). NCO transfers also increased by leaps and bounds. In 1965, there were only 2,197 ARVN NCOs attached to the RF; by 1969, they had grown to 14,526 serving alongside 26,989 of the original RF. Most of this transferred cadre consisted of reserve officers and NCOs who graduated from Thu Duc and the NCO Academy at Nha Trang respectively and whose origins represented a fair regional balance, to include a substantial percentage of those born in North Vietnam. Part of these transfers was the result of a regular rotation plan and another small part consisted of those who expressly applied for duty near their places of origin.

The local character of the RF, who were always considered "hometown soldiers," therefore, gradually disappeared at the officer and NCO level. It was retained only among the rank and file and those of Montagnard origins. By inclination, most of the transferred officers and NCOs preferred duty in the ARVN if given a free choice. They regarded duty in the RF as lowly and degrading, unbecoming of their regular force status. This feeling arose partly from a long prejudice which viewed the RF as a "poor cousin" and partly from the fact that opportunities for self-achievement in the usually neglected RF, particularly in terms of promotion and awards, were not as good as in the ARVN.

The Popular Forces, by contrast, did not have a rank system like the RF or the ARVN. There were only cadre functions: team leader, assistant squad leader, squad leader, assistant platoon leader, and platoon leader, which was the highest position in the PF. Consequently, a PF cadre was promoted to the next higher position only when there was a vacancy.

PF cadres were usually selected from among volunteer youths who had a smattering of military training or combat experience, especially those who had fought alongside or against French forces. Their appointments were recommended by the village chief, endorsed by the district chief, then approved and made official by the province chief's decision.

Up to 1964, there were practically no awards of medals and citations for meritorious service or combat exploits in the PF. But when the PF became part of the RVNAF, more attention was devoted to them in this respect. Still, medals and citations did not have as much attraction to the PF as to the ARVN and RF. The reason was that medals and citations did not count as merit points for promotion; they served, therefore, no practical purposes aside from being a source of temporary pride. Beginning in 1970, however, new pay and allowance regulations in the RVNAF instituted pay raise for the PF on the basis of medals or citations awarded. Normally, a PF trooper earned a fixed starting monthly salary which was raised to the next higher pay echelon only every two years.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Each echelon of PF pay raise was VN \$100 which in 1970 was worth about US 50 cents. This represented 4% of the PF starting base pay (VN \$2,500.00).

Now he could shorten this period by six months every time he was awarded a Gallantry Cross.

To provide senior and experienced PF cadres with more opportunities for self-advancement and enhance service incentives, the JGS also authorized their unlimited transfer to the Regional Forces with the rank of sergeant for platoon leaders and corporal for squad leaders. But this measure failed to attract most PF cadres, even though such a transfer meant a doubling of salary. They would rather forego material retributions for the chance to stay in their native villages, care for their dependents and tend ancestral tombs. It was primarily this deep attachment which motivated the village youth to volunteer for PF duty in the first place, not the attraction of a small sum of money.

### *Training*

From the day the territorial forces came into being up to 1960, formal training was almost non-existent. During that period, they operated in a hodge-podge manner almost like posses of volunteers. Those with some combat experience, by virtue of their former service in French forces, informally trained and guided the green troopers.

Not until 1961, when they benefited directly from the U.S. military assistance and advisory program, did the territorial forces begin to receive formal training under the auspices of MAAG advisers. Supervised by the General Directorate of Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, training was then focused on the unit level. Each CG company went through a 12-week unit training program while each SDC platoon or squad was trained only for six weeks. Initially, this training was conducted in the field by mobile MAAG advisory training teams which rotated among units. Subsequently, it was taken over by training centers as these facilities were constructed and became available on the basis of one SDC (PF) training center for each province and one CG (RF) training center per military region.

Up to 1964, however, basic individual training of recruits for the replacement pipeline was not available on a systematic basis. Training

provided either by U.S. mobile training teams or training centers was primarily of the unit type designed to improve poorly-performing units or to initiate the newly-activated ones.

Beginning in 1965, as the RF and PF began to operate as components of the RVNAF and training responsibilities were taken over by the Central Training Command, JGS, training for the RF and PF became more comprehensive and systematic, including both basic and refresher for individuals as well as for units. A standardized program of basic and refresher individual training was enforced for both the regular and territorial forces. Unit training programs, however, differed slightly in view of the specific roles and missions assigned to each force.

The selection and training of RF cadres were based on the same criteria as those applied to the ARVN with the exception of educational requirements which were lowered by one level in order to admit Montagnards. Trainees for PF platoon and squad leadership were subjected to a 14-week special program conducted by national training centers located in the region.

The initial establishment of provincial PF training centers responded to training needs and eased problems of transportation for individuals as well as for units. In time, however, they developed serious shortcomings which lowered training efficiency and productivity. For one thing, the existence of too many facilities tended to dilute experienced instructors and disperse limited training assets, causing shortages in both. This multiplicity also made training control and supervision difficult and caused divergences which affected training standards.

To remedy these shortcomings, in 1965 the JGS embarked on an improvement and consolidation program which, with MACV funding assistance, sought to develop and modernize the training base by consolidating a limited number of training centers conveniently located throughout South Vietnam. The first step consisted of minimizing the number of provincial PF training centers which were reduced from 26 to 12 by 1968. These twelve facilities were transformed into consolidated inter-provincial training centers which provided reasonable material well-being for students and better training facilities, especially comfortable billets and a modern





RF Soldiers Practiced Crossing a Log "Monkey" Bridge  
During Training

firing range. To accommodate increasing numbers of PF recruits and newly-activated platoons, two RF Training Centers, one at Cao Lanh (IV Corps area), and the other at Phu Cat (II Corps area) were made available for their training. As these two RF training centers were rehabilitated and expanded to an ultimate capacity of 4,000-6,000 students each, the 12 inter-provincial PF training centers were gradually deactivated. By 1971, there remained only five such facilities (Hoa Cam, in Quang Nam Province; Pleiku and Ninh Thuan in MR-2; Dinh Tuong and Vinh Long in MR-4). Eventually, they were all deactivated by mid-1972 with the exception of Hoa Cam, which, along with the Phu Cat and Cao Lanh RF facilities, were transformed into national training centers like five others (Dong Da in MR-1, Lam Son in MR-2; Quang Trung and Van Kiep in MR-3; and Chi Lang in MR-4). These consolidated facilities provided all individual and unit training for the RF and PF across the country. (Map 5)

The consolidation of individual and unit training facilities into eight large conveniently located centers effectively improved training productivity and standards, and greatly facilitated logistic support because it made an efficient and economical use of available resources. On the other hand, since only two such training facilities were available for a military region, this meant extended trips for new recruits and training units, and additional transportation burdens for the provinces. Recruits and trainees also had to incur additional expenses while undergoing training; so did their dependents and relatives when they wanted to make visits. Because of these additional outlays which were hard on their meager family budgets at a time of growing inflation, most servicemen, to include ARVN regulars, were discouraged and deeply worried at the prospect of having to undergo training, although they fully understood how this training was vital for their daily performance and future advancement.

To the sector headquarters, sending recruits and units to school was becoming a more burdensome responsibility because of limited transportation assets and the risk of en-route desertion. Sector commanders were also reluctant to release units, especially for refresher training, which they sorely needed in times of unexpected emergency. As a result,

Map 5 - Location of National Training Centers, Mid-1972



training quotas scheduled for each province for unit refresher and PF cadre training were seldom completely filled.

In order to encourage and require sector commanders to send PF cadre for training, the JGS adopted special measures allowing free food for PF cadres undergoing training and requiring sector commanders to appoint PF squad and platoon leaders only from those personnel who had completed training.

As for unit refresher training, it had become an established practice for sector commanders to request postponement on the pretext of combat operations or critical situations. Training schedules, therefore, were usually upset. Left to themselves, units rarely conducted any training between operations, primarily because of the lack of interest on the part of unit commanders. They spent most of their idle time for rest and recuperation. Finally, sector and subsector commanders seldom made serious efforts to enforce unit training among the RF and PF, knowing that this would tax these units to the limit of their endurance.