At the Leading Edge of Counterinsurgency

Mobile Advisory Teams were an unconventional approach to an unconventional war

by Terry T. Turner 8/29/2017

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Presidential aide Robert Komer promoted a counterinsurgency program whose military and civilian components were put under a unified command. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

Even before French soldiers left Vietnam in 1956 as France's colonial rule came to an end, U.S. Army advisers were already working in the country. Small numbers of American advisers had been there since 1950. Then in 1962 the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, was activated and put in charge of all U.S. troops in South Vietnam. Soon thousands of MACV Army advisers were assisting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. They were in every major ARVN unit, down to the battalion level.

U.S. advisers from the Navy, Air Force and Marines were also posted to relevant South Vietnamese units, but Army troops assigned to ARVN units were the most heavily involved in advisory activities. Beginning in late 1967, other Army advisers were formed into five-man teams with a special mission. Rather than being sent to units of the ARVN—the conventional, national military force responsible for the overall defense of the country—these Mobile Advisory Teams, or MATs, were dispatched to "territorial forces," essentially local militias fighting in villages and hamlets against the Viet Cong guerrillas engaged in an insurgency to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. More than 300 MATs operated in South

Vietnam and were the American agents of counterinsurgency in the Vietnamese countryside.

One of those teams, MAT IV-32 in Kien Phong province in the Mekong Delta was led by the author. The Roman numeral in the MAT designation refers to the geographical region, the Corps Tactical Zone, where the team operated: I Corps in the northern part of South Vietnam; II Corps in the central region; III Corps in the Saigon area; and IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. The other numeral is the team's number within its corps area.

Early in the war, U.S. military leaders knew little about the territorial militias, which were organized into two categories: Regional Forces, responsible for the defense of their home districts (a governmental unit below the province level, similar to U.S. counties); and Popular Forces, responsible for the defense of villages or hamlets. Neither had the pay, equipment or training of ARVN troops. They were generally poorly led and poorly motivated.

American interest in the territorial forces greatly increased with the creation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program in 1967. CORDS was a new type of counterinsurgency program, the brainchild of Robert Komer, a former member of the National Security Council and a special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Like previous counterinsurgency—or "pacification"—programs, it combined military measures to improve village security with economic development, social services and political reforms.

But CORDs recognized the failings of the earlier programs. Those efforts had run up against political turmoil and endemic corruption within the South Vietnamese government. They also were hampered by the division of the American leadership between the civilian and military aspects of pacification programs, which sometimes led to coordination problems and competing goals.

"For too long we didn't pay enough attention to the needs of the Vietnamese population and the local forces that could protect them," observed former 1st Lt. George Gandenberger, team leader of MAT IV-29 in Go Cong province in 1969. "We concentrated on the military conflict through main force, attrition warfare, and didn't see that the drivers of the conflict might be a need for clean water, improved agriculture, functioning markets and even an improved self-image."

Komer suggested to Johnson that a counterinsurgency program could succeed if it included greater resource commitments and a unified command structure. Civilian and military programs would be combined and headed by one person. The program would address the three main points: 1) security—village populations must feel safe; 2) development—village life must be enhanced; and 3) aggression against the enemy—insurgents' infrastructure in the villages must be destroyed. Dealing with all three issues at the same time would require coordination among the military, police forces and intelligence operations. Additionally, civic action would have to be backed by a vigorous public information, i.e., propaganda, campaign.

Johnson accepted Komer's program. So did the MACV commander, Gen. William Westmoreland. A combined military-civilian counterinsurgency effort was established under a unified command within MACV, which activated CORDS in May 1967. Komer was appointed deputy to the commander for CORDS. He was a civilian on the MACV staff with a position equivalent to four-star Gen. Creighton Abrams, who was Westmoreland's deputy for U.S. Army Vietnam, the conventional Army units in-country. Komer had authority over both the military and civilian sides of CORDS and reported directly to Westmoreland. That relationship with the MACV commander continued after Westmoreland left in June 1968 and Abrams took over.

CORDS' unified civilian-military structure was replicated at the provincial level. Province teams, already existing in all 44 provinces of South Vietnam, were headed by a senior adviser, typically a U. S. Army colonel, whose counterpart was the Vietnamese province chief. The province team had a deputy senior adviser, typically a civilian from the U.S. Agency for International Development or State Department. Team activities, such as civilian affairs (education, health, etc.), combat operations (advising the territorial forces) and intelligence collection (by military intelligence and the CIA) were coordinated under the CORDS umbrella. These activities at the district level were carried out by much smaller, all-Army teams led by a district senior adviser whose counterpart was the Vietnamese district chief.

A Popular Forces platoon and other villagers with hamlet defense duties learn how to set up Claymore mines in 1969. (Darrell Gross)

At the bottom of the CORDS organization and typically serving under the district teams were the Mobile Advisory Teams. Originally, 354 MATs were authorized to assist the territorial forces in hundreds of hamlets and villages across all regions of South Vietnam. They were the co vans, “trusted advisers,” who wore the MACV patch on their shoulder and often the blue beret of the territorial forces on their heads. MATs advised not only the Popular Forces and Regional Forces but also units of ethnic groups such as the Montagnards of the Central Highlands and the Hoa Hoa Buddhist sect in the Mekong Delta.

The teams were frequently in remote locations, out of sight to all but the Vietnamese soldiers and villagers they served and the enemy around them. The advisers knew they would have to work outside conventional military channels to succeed in their counterinsurgency campaign. Former 1st Lt. William Treadway, team leader of MAT II-36 in Kanh Hoa province in 1969, remarked, “Counterinsurgency warfare is unconventional warfare, and unconventional warfare requires unconventional means.” The limits of those means were a discovery every MAT member had to learn every day.

Most teams had two U. S. Army combat arms officers, three noncommissioned officers and a Vietnamese interpreter. The two officers were supposed to be a captain as team leader and a first lieutenant as assistant team leader. In practice, the team leaders were often first lieutenants. The NCOs were to be sergeants first

class or master sergeants serving as light weapons specialist, heavy weapons specialist and medic. As with officers, the NCO ranks sometimes were less senior than authorized.

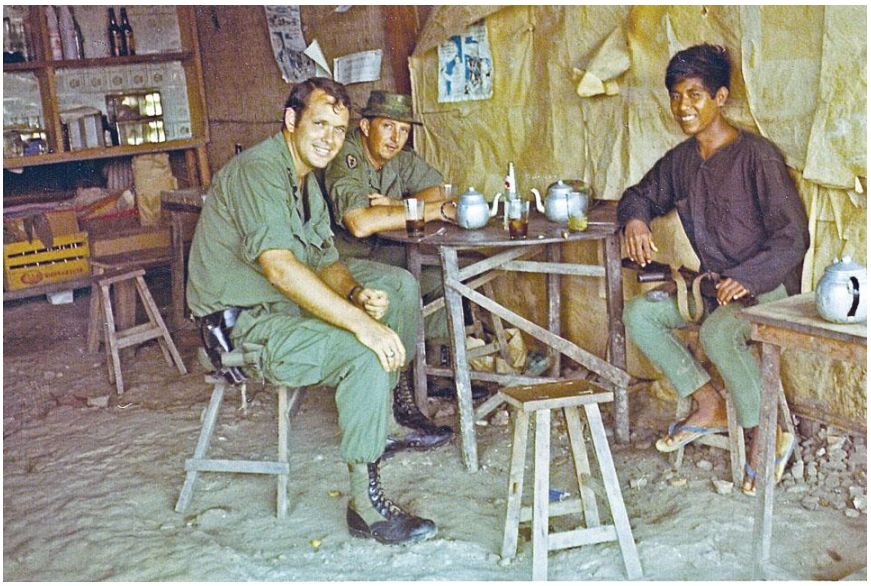
In late 1967 and early 1968 the first MATs were staffed with officers and sergeants who were already in Vietnam and had at least six months remaining on their tours. They were sent to Di An, a town near Saigon, for a two-week adviser school. That wasn't enough time for thorough training, and beginning in 1969 most of the officers assigned to CORDS had completed a six-week military adviser course at the Special Warfare School in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The course covered weapons and explosives training, counterinsurgency techniques, intelligence and counterintelligence operations, field-expedient engineering, the CORDS program, and Vietnamese language and culture. Some future advisers completed an additional 12-week language course run by the Defense Language Institute. Also starting in 1969, most MAT officers and sergeants arrived in Vietnam already assigned to CORDS.

Once the MAT advisers were stationed with their Regional Forces or Popular Forces units, they instructed those units on topics such as individual and crew-served weapons (mortars and machine guns), small-unit tactics and first aid. The advisers accompanied their units in the field, teaching on the spot to improve daylight operations, night ambushes, intelligence operations and other aspects of district, village or hamlet security. The patrolling and ambush techniques had to be adapted to the terrain and people involved, which called for flexibility and ingenuity on the part of the advisers, as well a willingness to acknowledge that their Vietnamese counterparts had a better understanding of the local environment.

Under the original concept of MATs, the advisers would work with a unit for six to nine months, then move to another one; thus, the "mobile" in Mobile Advisory Team. In practice, some advisers spent their entire tour with a MAT that never moved, likely because of the needs of the area where they were working. MAT officers did not command the units they were advising, but the Vietnamese commanders were instructed to follow their advisers' directions. Persuading the local commanders to take a MAT's advice was part of the challenge for the Americans. At the same time, however, the advisers were trying to teach the leaders of the Regional Forces and Popular Forces to be commanders themselves and not dependent on the Americans.

The advisers lived and worked in the villages or hamlets that were home to their assigned Vietnamese units. Most often, the team's

base was an earthen-walled or otherwise bunkered fort, which also housed the headquarters of the unit they advised. The forts varied in size and quality, but were usually triangular with hardened, packed-mud walls surrounded by a moat filled with punji stakes, “tangle-foot” barbed wire and concertina wire. The team’s quarters within a fort might be a brick-and-mortar house, a palm-thatch hooch or a one-room, plywood team-house designed by the Army for easy assembly and disassembly.



Capt. Robert Blair, leader of MAT IV-44 in Kien Giang province in 1971. (Courtesy Robert Blair)

Besides providing combat assistance for local forces, the advisers often supported the civilian aspects of CORDS as much as they could. MAT soldiers helped village officials develop schools, clinics and other projects that improved life in the area. It is not uncommon to hear former MAT leaders say that aspect of their assignment was like being in the Peace Corps, but with guns. The advisers might have been the only Americans for miles around and among the few a villager would ever see. Their role as a representative of the United States in those civil affairs interactions was often as important as their combat advice to the success of the counterinsurgency.

The CORDS strategy included an aggressive program to root out the Viet Cong’s clandestine political arm, which tried to put its operatives in control of village, district and province governments. The Phoenix Program, a joint effort of the U.S. military and CIA, worked with Vietnamese intelligence officials and province reconnaissance units (Vietnamese units with Phoenix advisers) to identify Viet Cong operatives who were then subject to being

captured or killed. MATs sometimes aided the Phoenix Program to further weaken the threat to their villages.

Each of the many responsibilities of MATs—training, combat operations, civil affairs, intelligence gathering and a miscellany of others that defy categorization—made an unending demand on time, attention and energy. Any respite from activity would soon prove to be nothing but a quiet before the storm. If an adviser serving on a MAT thought he had all his problems covered, it was "time to redouble your efforts," says former 1st Lt. Dan Reimer, team leader of MAT II-26 in Tuey Duc province in 1971, who described MAT service as "a varsity assignment."

The author once parodied the push-and-pull between competing duties in a 1969 photograph of him standing in front of a Popular Forces barracks being constructed with local material. He is holding a weapon in one hand and a stethoscope hangs on his chest. The thatch construction represents his team's work in field-expedient engineering, the weapon its combat operations and the stethoscope its civic action support. In the pocket of his cargo pants is a bottle of bourbon, a tongue-in-cheek comment on what a MAT adviser often felt was needed after dealing with his job's demands. It was a need largely left unsatisfied by the prudent co van.

Although CORDS was designed to have its civilian and military sides working in concert, each side sometimes felt stymied or undercut by the other, and a MAT's relationship with civilian personnel could go off-track. Gandenberger, the team leader of a Mekong Delta MAT in 1969, concluded that "U.S. civilians in a foreign combat zone are not to be trusted." After a bad experience with civilians, some MATs would do only their military advising job and leave the village development programs to others. CORDS oversight at the province level should have resolved those conflicts, but sometimes more attention was given to other fires. Nevertheless, the imperfect union of military and civilian outlooks could complicate efforts to reach a consensus.

MATs had problems not just with CORDS civilians but also with various aspects of the broader American military operation. MATs advisers often felt they were the poor cousins of the U.S. military in Vietnam. When MAT members arrived in-country, they were issued a weapon, a basic load of ammunition, jungle fatigues, boots, a backpack and other personal field gear. From then on, advisers were to get their supplies through the Vietnamese logistics system, which supposedly would ensure that they paid attention to the needs of the

local units and in the process improve a Vietnamese supply system noted for its corruption. In reality, the advisers and their units were at the bottom of the Vietnamese supply chain and in a poor position to have significant influence.

MATs were usually forced to become proficient scroungers from whatever American units they could reach. Sandbags and ammunition, which could be difficult to obtain through sources supplying the territorial forces, were often giveaways at American camps. Sometimes MATs traded captured Viet Cong weapons and flags to U.S. units in exchange for ammunition for the crew-served weapons and accessory items like generators or field ovens. Self-authorized supply expeditions directed at friendly American units could be as important to a MAT's survival as its combat operations directed at the enemy.

Former Capt. Bob Blair, team leader of MAT IV-44 in Kien Giang province in 1971, remembers: "Most of the materials for our construction projects came through the [Vietnamese] side, but they were liberally supplemented by MAT NCO-scrounged stuff from the U. S. Seabees.... A VC flag or an AK[-47 rifle] was a potent trading tool."

Because MATs were often in isolated locations that could be easily reached only by air, their food, laundry or other services had to be purchased locally and paid out of the team's own pockets. A "country store" of American-style canned goods, flour, frozen meats and so forth was maintained in most province team compounds, but the remote MATs rarely knew what was available there. MAT members largely ate local foods and adopted local customs. If an adviser could not learn to enjoy nuoc mam (a sauce made from fish), eat rice with chopsticks, pick apart a fish steamed in a banana leaf or munch on cooked rat as if it were barbecued chicken, he likely was shipped to the rear because of malnutrition, culture shock or an intractable attitude problem.

Considering the internal and external problems facing MATs, one might reasonably ask: Were they worthwhile? General Abrams thought so. Speaking at a staff briefing at MACV headquarters in Saigon on Jan. 22, 1969, he said the Mobile Advisory Teams had been "eminently successful" and had done "a hell of a lot" for the Regional Forces and Popular Forces, adding: "They live with them, fight with them, patrol with them, ambush with them, and so on. Then you get communication, then you get reaction [emphases his]."

Former MAT advisers say they saw improvements in their units' performance during the time they were with them but often attribute much of that progress to the U.S. air support and artillery support advisers brought with them. American firepower was understandably important to a unit's confidence and willingness to fight.

In the final struggle between conventional armies, the North Vietnamese Army beat the ARVN in 1975 and won the war, which would seem to make the effectiveness of the MAT counterinsurgency irrelevant. But it is not. The Vietnam experience offers insights for today, in light of the U.S. counterinsurgency experienced over nearly two
decades in Afghanistan and Iraq.

MATs were in the villages primarily to assist militia units in local security but also had the secondary task of assisting with civil affairs and intelligence operations—all important parts of the overall counterinsurgency strategy. Their effectiveness should be judged in the context of the CORDS strategy to push the enemy from the countryside.

Any analysis of CORDS/MAT effectiveness must acknowledge the possible manipulation, misinterpretation and overlooked subtleties in counterinsurgency statistics, such as the number of hamlets or villages in an area said to be secure, the number of insurgents killed or captured, the progress of various development programs and so forth. Nevertheless, the available data indicates that CORDS made significant inroads against the Communist insurgency, a conclusion corroborated by numerous U. S. and North Vietnamese sources that have emphasized the impact of CORDS initiatives, including the MAT advisory work with the territorial forces and the Phoenix Program's successes against the Viet Cong's secret leadership.

Some experts believe that North Vietnam launched a major military offensive across the South in 1972 because the insurgency there was failing. What the Communists could not gain by a popular uprising in South Vietnam they would take by force with the conventional troops of the NVA. The NVA's final success in 1975 trumped any successes that CORDS and its MATs had achieved by the time they were inactivated in 1973, the year the last American forces were withdrawn from the country. That ultimate North Vietnamese victory has led historian Richard Hunt to conclude in his book, Pacification: the American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds, that CORDS' overall achievement was ambiguous, at best.

That ambiguity is, no doubt, a lasting characteristic of the American effort in Vietnam, but what should be clear are the lessons of the Mobile Advisory Teams who operated at the leading edge of counterinsurgency. What they learned in Vietnam remains relevant because of this central truth: Conventional wars must be won on the battlefield, but insurgencies must be defeated in the village, where the fight is for the security and loyalty of the people.

In Vietnam, it was the U. S. Army MATs that went to help win that fight in the village. They performed their tasks under difficult, often dangerous circumstances, and helped push back an insurgency that the enemy ultimately had to abandon in favor of a direct invasion with a conventional army. MATs operated outside the Army's mainstream and were unknown to many, but given the current emphasis on counterinsurgency in national affairs, it is timely that they be remembered, not only for their presence in Vietnam, but for the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned about war in the village.

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Published in the October 2017 issue of Vietnam *magazine*