



The Ia Drang Campaign 1965: A Successful Operational Campaign Or Mere Tactical Failure?

Lt.-Col. Peter J. Schifferle

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This monograph analyzes the effectiveness of operational campaign design during the initial US ground combat in the Vietnam War. The focus is on the linkage of national strategic ends with military means and ways from the Spring of 1965 through the results of the Ia Drang battles of November 1965. The monograph identifies lessons from this period that are applicable to current US Joint and Army doctrine as well as lessons for planners and executors of US military action under the American system of civilian control of the military.

First, the monograph evaluates current US doctrine for campaigns and identifies the concept of linkage of national strategic ends with military ways and means as critical to successful campaign design. Then the monograph assesses US military doctrine in 1965, identifying the weakness of unconventional warfare capabilities. A detailed discussion of the concept of both limited war and gradualism as national strategies, includes the limits on military action imposed by these strategies. Section III identifies specific military objectives identified by the National Command Authority, including preventing the war in Vietnam from escalating to a general war. The primacy of President Johnson's domestic concerns is also identified.

The monograph then assesses the effectiveness of US military campaign planning and execution in 1965. The conclusion is that the operational ways and means used by General Westmoreland in the conduct of his chosen strategy of attrition were not linked in any way with the national strategic aim of limited warfare. The monograph also identifies a failure in supervision by civilian leaders, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, of the military planning and conduct of the air and ground campaign in South Vietnam. Too little supervision was the cause of failure, not over supervision by the civilian and military leadership.

The monograph concludes with an analysis of the lessons from 1965 that are appropriate for the post-Cold War world. The most important lesson is the need for the military campaign planner to understand the linkage between national strategic aim and military means and ways. The monograph recommends rewriting FM 100-5 to include the doctrine and capability needed by US forces to fight protracted wars. American civilian leaders may commit American forces into a protracted war either through a clear strategic choice or as a result of restrictions on the use of force.

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