

SOCIAL SCIENCE

The Australian counterinsurgency campaign in the Vietnam war: the ambush battle

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From 1966 to 1971 Australia deployed the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) to the Vietnam War. Australia's involvement in the war took the form of a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. Counterinsurgency campaigns often consist of thousands of seemingly unrelated minor combat incidents. Military historians using traditional techniques can find it difficult to make sense from this plethora of contacts that, individually, may seem inconsequential. Using the statistical mapping techniques we demonstrate here can tease out a comprehensible story from these thousands of otherwise apparently unrelated combat events. We tested the extent to which the Vietnamese were able to exploit the advantages of the ambush against 1ATF. Military commanders can use our methods to better understand the ebb and flow of their campaigns and to structure their operations to achieve the desired form of contact.

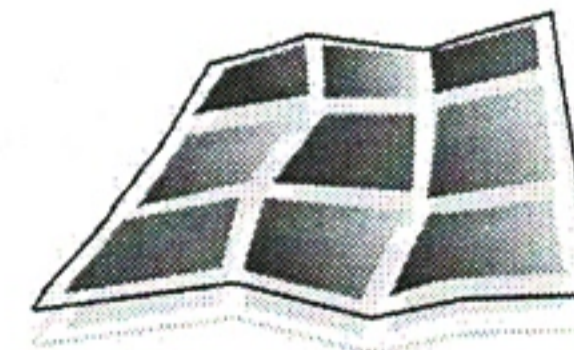
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1. Introduction

From June 1966 to September 1971 Australia deployed the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) to Vietnam to join United States and other Free World Forces in supporting the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) against an insurgency mounted by the National Liberation Front and the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). While US forces fought a war characterised by big battles, 1ATF was allocated an Area of Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province where, apart from a small number of major battles, the war took the form of a protracted counterinsurgency campaign against the National Liberation Front (known as the Viet Cong) and the People's Army of Vietnam (henceforth, VC/PAVN).

The protracted nature of the struggle and the VC/PAVN desire to avoid battle unless assured of success, forced upon 1ATF the need to find the elusive enemy to bring him to battle. The bulk of the 1ATF campaign in Phuoc Tuy Province therefore consisted of many small, fleeting, battles (known as 'contacts') which can be categorised into four types; patrol contacts, bunker

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system attacks, defensive contacts and ambushes. This map and its accompanying article examine 1ATF ambushes of the VC/PAVN. These made up 36% of all 1ATF contacts (Ross, 2013). However, bunker system attacks (8% of total contacts) also affected 1ATF ambushes. Bunker system attacks led to the destruction of enemy food reserves, forcing VC/PAVN units to enter villages to restock. This made VC/PAVN food portering patrols vulnerable to 1ATF ambushes.

The ambush is a favourite insurgent technique (Australian Army 1964) and the VC/PAVN were regarded as expert in its conduct. However, our data show that 1ATF were far more effective at ambushing than the VC/PAVN. 1ATF ambushed VC/PAVN elements on 1077 occasions whereas the VC/PAVN managed to ambush 1ATF elements on only 103 occasions. Our data also show that in terms of loss ratio, 1ATF ambushes were more effective than VC/PAVN ambushes (1:8.7 in favour of 1ATF and 1:2.7 in favour of the VC/PAVN, respectively). However, since we are not attempting to examine relative ambush skills, we make no further reference to VC/PAVN ambushes of 1ATF in this article.

2. Methods

After each contact, the 1ATF patrol commander filed by radio, a report stating the date/time of the incident, its location (expressed as a 6-figure military grid reference), an estimate of the enemy strength, a description of the enemy, their direction of movement and a brief description of what happened (Australian Army, 1971a). When he later returned to the Australian base at Nui Dat the patrol commander added more detail to this report based on the initial radio report, details recorded in his field notebook and discussions with his soldiers. In total, about 30 pieces of information were recorded. These included range of visibility, which side opened fire first, type of contact, weapons fired, number of shots fired, casualties caused, etc (Australian Army, 1971b). These reports were collected at Task Force Headquarters and now form part of the archival collection at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

We have converted these paper-based reports into a database (Ross, 2013). In many cases, correspondence files, secondary sources and interviews with participants have been used to add detail to particular entries. The database can now be analysed statistically, spatially and temporally to detect patterns in combat. The database contains 3909 contacts. Using the 6-figure grid reference and contextual spatial information digitised from scanned, georeferenced Vietnam War-era topographic maps, we mapped the combat incidents over time. This process revealed hitherto unseen patterns in the conflict.

In this set of maps, we focus on a subset of the database that includes the 1077 1ATF ambushes of the enemy. In its 1965 doctrinal pamphlet *Ambush and Counter Ambush*, the Australian Army defined an ambush to be a surprise attack upon a moving or temporarily halted enemy by a force lying in wait (Australian Army, 1965). It is usually a brief encounter and does not require the capture and holding of ground.

We also examined 1ATF bunker system attacks. Early in 1ATF's campaign these involved the capture of large stocks of food, but over time these captures diminished, indicating that the VC/PAVN no longer held reserves of food. This forced the VC/PAVN to rely on their patrols penetrating into villages to receive food resupplies which were then carried to their troops waiting in the jungle. The substantial amounts of food needed to support VC/PAVN combat units required large and frequent patrols into the villages. These patrols were vulnerable to ambush by 1ATF. These ambushes tended to cluster around villages and occurred shortly after nightfall and before dawn when the enemy hoped their patrols would be unseen.

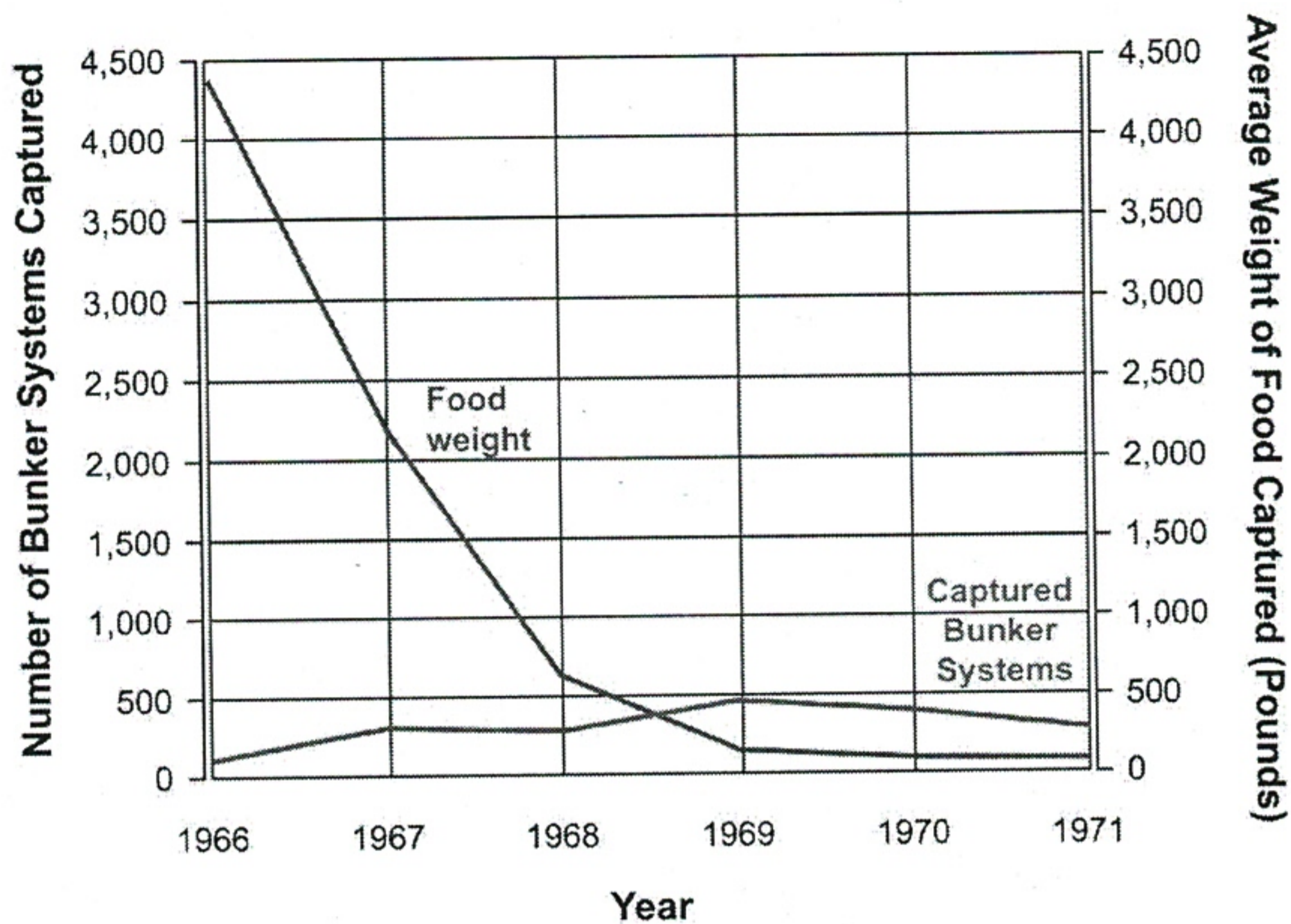


Figure 1. Capture of enemy food caches from bunkers. Notes: (1) Most bunker systems were captured without a fight. They were either unoccupied or were quickly abandoned by a small 'caretaker' force in the face of an approaching 1ATF patrol. However, in some cases VC/PAVN forces strongly resisted 1ATF attempts to seize particular bunker systems. (2) 1966 and 1971 are not complete years. 1ATF arrived in Phuoc Tuy Province and began operations in June 1966. It withdrew from the Province in September 1971.

3. Conclusions

The main map (Map 1) clearly shows that 1ATF ambushes of the VC/PAVN tended to cluster at particular points. 1ATF ambushes were generally set on tracks leading from the jungle, across open paddy fields, to the villages. This map also shows relative strength of the forces involved in each ambush, with 1ATF usually achieving local numerical superiority, especially in contacts with small enemy force sizes.

The map of 1ATF attacks on enemy bunker systems (Map 2) shows that bunker systems tended to be located away from villages and roads yet could accommodate large numbers of enemy soldiers. These soldiers required food. However, Figure 1 shows that the food stocks held in bunker systems rapidly diminished as a result of 1ATF captures of the bunkers. This forced the VC/PAVN to become more reliant on entering villages to get food. In turn, this resulted in clusters of 1ATF ambushes within 2.5 kilometres of villages.

Finally, the series of small maps showing the locations of ambushes at selected times indicates that ambushes within 2.5 kilometres of villages peaked at around 8:00 pm (Maps 3 to 8). This tended to be followed by a slight lull in ambush activity as VC/PAVN patrols already inside villages were restocked with food, before another peak in ambushes in the pre-dawn as VC/PAVN patrols left the villages to get back to the jungle before full daylight.

Counterinsurgency campaigns often consist of thousands of seemingly unrelated minor combat incidents. Military historians using traditional techniques can find it difficult to make sense from this plethora of contacts that, individually, may seem inconsequential. Using the statistical and mapping techniques we demonstrate here can tease out a comprehensible story from these thousands of otherwise apparently unrelated combat events.

Military commanders can use these statistical techniques combined with mapping and temporal analysis to better understand the ebb and flow of the campaign they are waging and to structure their operations to achieve the desired form of contact.

Software

The Vietnam Combat Database was produced using FileMaker Pro 8. Digitising, spatiotemporal analysis and map compilation were accomplished using ArcGIS 10.1.

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