

Environment and War:

The Impact of Geography, Terrain, and Weather on The Vietnam War

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Over the last century military historians have focused on tactics, technology, the size of armies, and the generals and political officials who led them. However, there is an important factor about war and military tactics that is often forgotten. That factor is the Environment. The environment dictates tactics and the type of force that can be used. It limits movement and restricts a commander's options, while weather can help the attacker and eliminate air superiority. As one will see, Terrain has dictated combat from the Roman Invasion of Germania to the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam. Not only will we see how it dictates smaller engagements, but we will also see how it affects the way entire wars are fought.

Two wars that appear to be almost the same; were both affected by completely different factors. Each occurred in Asia, one in the 1950's in Korea and the other in Vietnam. The way commanders fought each of these conflicts was dictated almost entirely by environmental factors, from the surrounding countries and oceans to the hills and mountains in the combat areas. The difference in the outcome of these wars was simple. It was the land area that needed to be defended, and the means the armies had to defend it. Korea was dictated to be a pure conventional war only because the land area that needed to be defended. The Korean peninsula is narrow, and surrounded by water on three sides. A military commander could fix both his flanks on the natural obstacle the Ocean provided, and cover those flanks by a powerful navy. There was no worry about infiltration from a bordering land mass. Vietnam was a completely different story. Rather than having to worry about a boarder between two nations that was one hundred kilometers, the United States and South Vietnamese military commanders had to defend a border approximately seventeen hundred miles long that the North Vietnamese used to move men and material into the country to launch assaults into the country and support an insurgency. Combined with the thick vegetation, mountainous terrain, and extreme weather conditions the coalition forces had to use

new technology and tactics to defend South Vietnam. Thus the terrain in Vietnam dictated the position of forces, the tactics military commanders used, and the eventual outcome of the war.

From the earliest conflict between men, battles have been dictated by terrain; whether it was the Greeks at Thermopylae or the Romans in Europe. In *Landscape and Memory* Simon Schama brings this point to bear. The Roman Legions were focused on conquering the German people. They pushed large numbers of troops across the Rhine and into unfamiliar territory that was held sacred to the German people. Many of the roads and passageways used by the Romans were isolated and restricted in the woods, swamps, and Rivers of Germania. ¹

The Romans may have been the better-trained and more seasoned troops but, as one will find, terrain can dictate the victor of a battle or of a war. According to Schama in 9 A.D. the Roman leader Varus marched an Army of 25,000 troops from the River Weser to a protected winter quarters. Unfortunately for the Romans the route was secluded by woods, rivers, and swamps and made for a perfect ambush by the Cheruscas Spearman. Once attacked there was no way for retreat because of the swampland and no way to advance into the thick woods. ²The Superior Roman force was trapped and slaughtered in detail.

This was an early depiction of how terrain dictates the battlefield. From this conflict leaders should have learned that terrain more than any other aspect dictates the battle and thus the war. 25,000 highly trained Roman Soldiers could not defeat this force. And it was not because of superior training or better equipment. It was because the Germans held a complete understanding of how to use the restrictive terrain of their country to their advantage. And thus they became the victors. The Romans did not learn this lesson in combat. Again the Roman Legions pushed into Germania, again they were brought into battle, and again they were cut down. It took until 16 A.D.

¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996): 87

for the Roman Generals to realize that they could use the forests to their advantage and achieve a total victory.³ Once again it took a commander's understanding of how one uses geography can determine the victor of the battle.

Moving more towards the present one must look at the various impacts that the environment has on war as well as the consequences war has on the environment. The article, *War's Environmental Impact*, from *Alternatives Journal*, outlines many of these concerns. This article outlines the huge impact that war has on the environment. In fact it shows that not only does the actual act of war affect the environment but also the planning, preparation, and aftermath of war. Often times, war is a result of border disputes and natural resources contained within the borders of a country. This article directly addresses the various environmental causes of war. From the Destruction of drug fields by the British in the Falkland Islands; to the westward expansion that caused the Frontier War with Native Americans. Although often times it is about a single resource. The U.S. embargo of oil to Japan caused the Japanese to forcefully expand throughout oil rich southeast Asia, thus bringing the U.S. into World War Two.⁴

Even war preparation has its effects. Sonar on naval vessels kills whales. Canals that are built to speed troop movement separate land areas and destroy habitats, and trees that were once cut to make masts of ships have never re-grown. The direct and postwar impacts may be the worst of all. In Vietnam nineteen million Gallons of herbicide were used to clear forests. Iraq ignited 700 oil wells in 1991. These spread toxic smoke across the region. Depleted Uranium from new high tech munitions can contaminate soil and water for years after the conflict. And chemicals used can kill animals well after they have been expended. In fact, in Russia 500,000 Antelopes were killed

² Ibid, p.88-89.

³ Ibid, p.90-91

⁴ "War's Environmental Impact," *Alternatives Journal* 30, No 4 (September 2004): 26

in one hour from grazing on contaminated lands.⁵

These are all causes and effects that the environment has on war. However they often go overlooked. The public tends to focus on the loss of human life and the money that is taken from their pockets to pay for the bombs, bullets, and vehicles that help cause this natural destruction. Again this shows the forgotten impact that the environment has on war. This highlight may not be shown more clearly than in two cold war conflicts. Politically they appear to be the same, A communist government invading a “democratic” country. However, the regional geography shaped how these conflicts were fought and how their results.

Eugene Rabinowitch focused on these differences in his article, *Vietnam: Politics Vs. Geography*. The Korean conflict was shaped by the location of the peninsula. At its widest point Korea is one hundred miles across. It was surrounded by water on three sides. This terrain only allowed the North to do a mass invasion across a fixed front, keeping the war conventional. It also allowed sea power to be a major factor, which helped the allies who controlled the oceans around Korea. The other important factor was that both sides could anchor their flanks on the water, thus there was little room to maneuver.⁶ This caused a stalemate that was similar to the one that occurred in World War One. It also allowed a weak democratic government to gain stability and strength. South Korea is still a democratic stronghold to this day.

However Vietnam is a completely different story. Unlike Korea Vietnam was only exposed to water on two sides. The western boarder was fixed on Cambodia and Laos. Not only did these nations have no stable government to prevent the North from transporting goods to the Viet Cong in the South, but they also made the boarder indefensible. The United States and South Vietnam did not have enough troops to cover this enormous boarder. Therefore instead of being forced

⁵ Ibid, p.26.

⁶ Rabinowitch, Eugene, “Vietnam: Politics Vs. Geography,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*

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across the de-militarized Zone the North Vietnamese Army could infiltrate South Vietnam through Cambodia and Laos. Therefore they forced the U.S. into a unconventional war which leveled the technological playing field.⁷ Essentially the geography caused the failure of the South Vietnamese Government because there was no way to control the flow of Troops and supplies into the South.

From Rabinowitch's text we can see the role that geography played. This was not only a war between communists and democracy. Nor was it a difference in the training of the soldiers. It was how the terrain was used in each conflict that shaped the outcome. The North Vietnamese used the terrain to keep the south unstable. Although they were defeated on the battlefield the instability that the unabated flow of troops and supplies allowed the war to end in the manner that it did.

As much as regional geography dictated how the commanders approached the war, the local geography was just as important to the outcome of battles. Probably the best example of how geography can cause battles and how it affects the outcome is seen at the battle of Khe Sanh on the Khe Sanh Plateau in the Quang Tri Province of South Vietnam. Grey Wirth focused on this fight and the effect that terrain had on it's outcome in *The Battle of Khe Sanh*. This battle took place over a year long period from April 1967 to April 1968 and it occurred in three phases. All dictated by the Terrain. The first phase occurred after the U.S. placed a base on the Plateau. They did this because of the geographic location of Khe Sanh allowed North Vietnamese Army troops to enter the area from both Laos and the Demilitarized Zone.⁸

In this phase it was essential for the Marines to capture the Hills surrounding the plateau. In doing this they gave themselves a great vantage point to watch the NVA movements and to call in Indirect Fire and Close Air Support. By doing this it allowed 6,000 Marines to hold off 20,000 NVA Regulars. The terrain also allowed the Marines to be re-supplied by air. Which was critical

1972): 27.

⁷ Ibid, p.28.

after the NVA cut off the roads around Khe Sanh. Without this geographical advantage the entire 6,000 man force would have been entirely destroyed.⁹

The Geography was not the only factor that dictated the battle. The weather in the monsoon season gave the Vietnamese a slight advantage. The constant rain and low cloud ceiling prevented U.S. Close Air Support and slowed down the re-supply. However the Marines' command of the hills still allowed them to hold off the superior force. The dense jungle also influenced operations. But again it was the control of the hills that benefited the Marines. In fact the NVA had as much artillery and mortar support as the Marines. But the control of the hills allowed them to keep the NVA from seeing their positions and re-supply points while allowing the Marines to observe every NVA movement.¹⁰

If the NVA had gained control of these hill the Marines in the area would have been annihilated. Thus this emphasizes the huge factor that geography is in battle. No amount of artillery, Close Air Support, or aerial re-supply could have saved the Marines if they did not hold the hills. By doing so they caused approximately 15,000 NVA Casualties while only suffering 206 of their own.¹¹ Much like in 9th century Germania terrain had again determined the outcome of a major battle.

The conflict in Vietnam was of a nature never before seen by the United States Military. And much of the reason for this rested in three factors, the political situation, the structure of the enemy's forces, and in the environmental factors, such as geography and weather.

As the U.S. involvement in Vietnam climaxed in 1968 and 1969, the North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam launched a country wide offensive against the South

⁸ Wirth, Gray, "The Battle of Khe Sanh," *Engineer 23, No 4*, (November 1993): 48.

⁹ Ibid, p.49-50.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.49-51

¹¹ Ibid, p. 51.

hitting every major population center and base in the country. This assault began during the Vietnamese Lunar New Year known as Tet. This major offensive showcased the factors that terrain and weather played on the war in Vietnam.

Geography and placement of Military Bases

In 1968 the U.S. had roughly half a million combat troops stationed in bases and cities across Vietnam. These bases ranged from Khe Sanh near the Demilitarized zone all the way to Dong Tam in the southern tip of South Vietnam. In fact by looking at the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam overlays of the position of forces, many of these forces were stationed in the northern region in the Quang Tri Province and along the coast and western border all the way down to Saigon and the Mekong Delta, where two Army Divisions had been based around the city.¹² This was caused by the insurgency into South Vietnam. However, it shows that rather than defending from a northern attack across the narrow demilitarized zone, the forces were positioned to defend from the eastward movement of NVA and VC forces from the Ho Chi Minh trail that led into the country from Laos and Cambodia.

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) had divided the country into four separate areas, known as Military Regions (MR). Going from MR 1 in the north around the DMZ and Quang Tri Province all the way down to the Mekong Delta in MR 4. Each of these regions was divided between separate army corps. It is interesting that most of the units were stationed in and around the DMZ in the north and the 3 major population centers and the remainder of the majority of forces were stationed in the south by Saigon. The remainder of coalition forces were stationed along the coastline connecting these two regions.¹³

This is of interest because it shows the geographic problem that faced commanders in

¹² Army Activities Report:SE Asia. January 1968, p.6, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

South Vietnam. If one looks at just Vietnam it is noticeable that the border between North and South Vietnam is extremely narrow. In fact it is only about one hundred kilometers in width. This would be an extremely easy area to defend against if Vietnam were a peninsula as was the case in Korea. However, Vietnam is bordered to the west by Laos and Cambodia. The availability of terrain that was out of control of the forces in South Vietnam allowed the north to set up a supply trail into the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Because of this geographical location, the North could bring troops and supplies into the south from east to west, thus making the geographical area that the RVN and US forces had to defend to stretch from 100 kilometers to a little over 1700 kilometers. ¹⁴Complicating the task of defending that area is there was only one road, Rte 1 that traveled north to south. This complicated friendly movement along the boarder. Combining the large boarder, with limited improved road surfaces, and the jungles, mountains and lower delta regions, defending the eastern border was a daunting task.

Tactics and Technology Defeat Terrain

The rough terrain in Vietnam advanced a new technology and tactic for the United States. This new tactic was known as airmobile operations. The army defined an airmobile operation as: “an operation in which combat forces and their equipment move about the battlefield in aircraft under the control of a land force commander to engage in land combat. Airmobile forces are trained and equipped to take advantage of the superior mobility, which distinguishes them from conventional ground forces. Their equipment is designed for maximum air transportability.” ¹⁵

¹³ Army Activities Report:SE Asia. January 1968, p.6, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

¹⁴ Army Activities Report:SE Asia. July 1970, p.11, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ Department of the Army, Field Manual 1-100, p. 30, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

These new operations combined the use of helicopters with the airlifting of troops and supplies around the combat zone. In these instances infantry platoons, companies, battalions, and in some cases, divisions would be paired with corresponding helicopter aviation units. This increased the effectiveness of the troops because they could be placed in any location throughout the country as long as there was a large enough landing zone, or cleared open area for the helicopters to land in and deliver the troops.¹⁶ Helicopters practically eliminated the challenge of thick vegetation and limited roads on major troop movements. Thus a major combat unit could be placed on the ground in a short period of time after enemy had been located or a unit had been engaged. Thus the military could engage a enemy force, fix it in place, and bring a larger force in to destroy it. These aircraft were also used to bring in a constant flow of supplies to friendly forces and it eliminated the need for a long, vulnerable supply line through the jungles of Vietnam.

Helicopters were also vital to the fighting of the guerrilla war in the RVN. Because of their advantages in defeating the rough terrain and vegetation, these aircraft were used to gather intelligence and transport troops quickly around the area of operation so that they could maintain an element of surprise over the enemy.¹⁷ This was helped by the hills, valleys, and thick vegetation; because helicopter pilots could use those terrain features to approach a landing zone or target and maintain concealment from the enemy's eyes until they were on top of the position. Not only did the helicopter defeat the obstacle that the terrain imposed but it also used terrain to its advantage.

The capabilities of this equipment could be hindered by the harsh weather conditions in Vietnam. Low cloud ceilings, fog, and heavy precipitation could prevent these aircraft from flying.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 4-5

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 34-35

While in some instances low cloud ceilings could help airmobile operations, the addition of fog or precipitation practically halted all movement.¹⁸ This could be especially dangerous during the monsoon season that lasted from September to January in Vietnam. In some instances troops that had been inserted by helicopters to go on patrol could not be exfiltrated during intense periods of rain, which led to some dangerous situations.¹⁹ Because they were now cut off from their only way of escape, reinforcements and any possibility of re-supply until the rain would end.

Helicopter bases were also primarily established in low flat areas in large land areas. While the helicopter did not need long runways to take off airmobile units required a large amount of helicopter assets, so the bases had to be large enough and flat enough to handle all the air traffic. They were also limited on where landing zones could be, small clearings were fine for platoon and company operations but bigger landing zones were needed for battalion and higher-level operations. Thus the enemy had a relatively good idea of where the forces would land at, and could prepare for their arrival by having forces over-watch potential landing zones.²⁰

Whatever limitations the weather and terrain placed on the use of Airmobile Operations, they were not significant enough to halt their use and the better mobility of forces explains the placement of MACV installations in the south. Because the helicopter could reach far inland, they could have the U.S. bases at population centers in the low flat coastal regions.²¹ This allowed for defense of major population centers but also allowed the mobility to transport troops and supplies in and out of smaller outposts guarding against infiltration from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Thus the helicopters ability to defeat terrain restrictions further explains the location of U.S. bases.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 8

¹⁹ Frank Johnson, *Diary of an Airborne Ranger, New York Ballantine books, 2001.* p. 55

²⁰ Ibid.,p 119.

²¹ Ibid, p. 30,

Not only did the weather play havoc on airmobile operations but it also prevented many normal operations for soldiers in the field. On days with low cloud ceilings it could be difficult to get a good azimuth on a compass and keep track of a units position because of limited visibility to navigate off of surrounding terrain. In cases of severe storms lightning strikes could knock out vital communications and play havoc on a perimeter defenses, because the electrical discharge from a lightning strike could set off all the claymore mines and other defense mechanisms placed outside the perimeter to prevent enemy infiltrations. ²²Perhaps one of the most noted effects of Vietnamese weather on troops was the extreme heat and humidity that encountered the troops as they debarked the planes when arriving in the RVN. A U.S. Soldier coming fresh off the plane in Vietnam may have put it the best when he said, “The heat just hits you right in the face. Its like California, but far more intense.” ²³

However the weather did not only affect MACV operations, it also affected the NVA and VC forces. Because they had no choice to move on the ground on dirt paths and through the jungles the NVA and VC troops were limited in periods of bad weather. Operations on both sides seemed to halt when the monsoon rains became intense. It was not a favorable time to become engaged for either force. ²⁴

The commanders on the ground could factor in this weather and the terrain features to indicate where attacks could be carried out. In the Darlac Province it was found that the main river running through the province was not fordable by foot, so NVA forces would be limited in the area they could infiltrate through. It was also found that the central highlands were difficult to maneuver through because the thick terrain that caused limited movement and visibility. As well

²² Frank Johnson, *Diary of an Airborne Ranger*. P. 209.

²³ Ibid, p. 5

as the Ham Sathay River and Se San River were barriers to east-west travel during the wet season.

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The Tet Offensive and Terrain

Base locations, airmobile assets, and the weather all lead up to the explanation of the effect terrain and weather played on the Tet Offensive. January in Vietnam is a relatively dry month on average across the four military regions in RVN. There were typically only two to four days of insignificant rainfall during that time period.²⁶ This weather proved favorable to the NVA forces that would initiate the attack, because the dry conditions allowed for the movement of heavier equipment to support the assault into the south. The conditions also allowed for a break from the heat, because the average temperature during the month ranged from seventy five to eighty five degrees. However, these effects were the same on U.S. forces, so while it gave the NVA an advantage for movement of troops it also cleared the way for the U.S. to maneuver its forces at will across the country to meet the tide of the invasion and allowed for uninterrupted air support. This would prove vital in the region around Khe Sanh.

In early January MACV gained intelligence that there was a large buildup of VC and NVA forces on the western border of South Vietnam and also around the northern outpost of Khe Sanh. During this time period these forces began almost a daily probe of the major U.S bases and provincial capitals.²⁷ In doing this they were preparing for an all out assault during the normal truce for the Tet holiday. Not only did the holiday truce give the attackers an element of surprise, the weather during this time of the year is almost a perfect condition to launch a coordinated mass

²⁴ Ibid, p. 55-60

²⁵ USMACV. AC of S J-2 PERINTREP. January 1968, p 21. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 14

attack across the country.

On the evening of January 30 into January 31, 1968 the NVA and VC launched it's major assault across the country. The first assault was launched in the Kontum province near the western boarder with Cambodia in the middle of South Vietnam. The second assault came in the Pleiku Province, just south of Kontum. It was combined assault of local forces and an NVA Regiment that infiltrated across the boarder. On the same day a NVA regiment assaulted the Hanh Hoa Province. It is located southwest of Pleiku along the coast. The attack was on the provincial capital of Nha Trang. Another assault was coordinated against the Darlac Province to the east of Han Hoa, it was carried out by three enemy battalions.²⁸

On January 31st the attacks continued. The first came to the I Corps area in the Northern part of South Vietnam. The assault was carried out at once on the Quang Tri Province, which is right across the DMZ. It was also carried out against the Thua Thien province and captured much of the City of Hue minus the MACV compound across the river. The assault continued in the Quang Tin and Quang Nai Province, which are located south of Hue at the edge of I Corps.²⁹

Meanwhile the attacks in the center of the country were continuing with a new assault against the Phu Yen and Binh Tuan Provinces located along the coastline. At this time attacks were also occurring against the Gia Dinh, Dinh Tuong, Kien Hoa, Vinh Long, Vin Binh, Phong Dinh, Kien Giang, Chau Doc, Ba Xuyen and An Xuyen Provinces located around Saigon and the Mekong Delta. Each of these attacks were carried out by both local VC units and NVA regular army units and each of these provincial capitals had been hit with at least three to five enemy

²⁸ Ibid, p. 14-18

²⁹ Ibid, p. 14-18

battalions.³⁰

During the month of January, including probing operations and the all out offensive on Tet, the enemy launched three hundred-fifty two attacks against MACV and RVN installations all over the south. Interestingly there were twice as many attacks in the third and fourth military regions, well below the DMZ.³¹

The large presence of NVA Battalions and equipment during the Tet Offensive prove that rather than being a north to south linear war, the war in Vietnam was affected by neighboring terrain and therefore became a eastward conflict with troops and equipment from the north traveling into the country from the western borders with Laos and Cambodia. Because of this it is clear that these geographical, terrain, and weather patterns in South Vietnam shaped this battle and the outcome of the war. Terrain also caused the advancement of new airmobile tactics that proved helpful in defeating the limitation that terrain placed on troop movements. However the vast western border of South Vietnam made it practically impossible for the MACV and RVN forces to halt the movement of men and material. Ultimately it was this inability to defend the western border from infiltration that led to the eventual U.S. Withdraw from Vietnam. Thus culminating in the victory of North in the mid 1970's.

By looking at the research it is clear that there is a distinct lack of focus on how terrain impacts the battlefield. All too often historians find themselves focusing on the decisions commanders make or the massive loss of life. But we do not look into what causes both of these events. It is the terrain that shapes the battlefield and decides every other aspect of the conflict. Terrain helped save the U.S. effort in Korea and it led to it's defeat in Vietnam.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 14-18

³¹ Ibid, p. 19

Annotated Bibliography

Army Activities Report: SE Asia. 29 July 1970. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This is part of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) collection. It highlighted all the major movements of units and soldiers in and out of South Vietnam. I used this document to determine the major positions of U.S. military installations in Vietnam during the period of the war around the Tet Offensive.

Army Activities Report: SE Asia. 01 January 1968. Army Heritage Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This collection is part of the MACV collection. It highlighted the major movements of units and troops in and out of Vietnam prior to the Tet Offensive in January of 1968. I used this source to determine the positions of U.S. forces prior to the offensive and track trends that occurred regarding the position of U.S. military installations in South Vietnam.

Department of The Army. Field Manual 1-100 Army Aviation Utilization. Headquarters, Department of the Army. November 1966. Army Heritage Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This Manual was part of the collection and the Army Heritage Education Center. It was one of the first manual on helicopter (airmobile) operations. It was the basis for how this new technological advancement was used in coordination with ground operations and provided a wealth of knowledge on how air mobility effected military operations and defeated the challenges terrain caused.

Johnson, Frank. *Diary of an Airborne Ranger*. New York. Ballantine Books, 2001.

This source is a published first hand account of the Vietnam War by a soldier who served in the war. It is a day to day diary of his experiences and operations that he conducted in Vietnam. This source was helpful in determining the first hand accounts of how terrain and weather effected day to day operations.

Rabinowitch, Eugene. "Vietnam: Politics Vs. Geography." *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 28, No 3 (March 1972): 27-29.

This was a secondary source on Vietnam written around the time of the Vietnam war. It compares the effect that geography played in Vietnam by comparing the location of Vietnam to that of Korea and providing insight on how the different land features affected each war. I used it to highlight my primary hypothesis on how geography effected the outcome of the Vietnam war.

Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. P87-91.
USMACV. AC of S J-2 PERINTREP. January 1968. Army Heritage Education Center,
Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

This is a secondary source that hypothesized the impact the environment had on the history of the German people. I used a specific section of this book which focused on the Roman Invasion and how the Germans defeated them using terrain. It provided my first research into how terrain effected military operations.

“War’s Environmental Impact.” *Alternatives Journal* 30, No 4 (September 2004): 26

This article that appeared in *Alternatives Journal* gave a wealth of basic information on the Impact that the Enviroment had on causing conflict, planning for war, and how the aftermath of the war effected the environment. I used this to reinforce the hypothesis that geography and terrain effected the outcome of war.

Wirth, Gray. “The Battle of Khe Sanh.” *Engineer* 23, No 4. (November 1993): 48-53.

This article that appeared in the magazine *Engineer*, a publication associated with the U.S. Army Engineering Corps, gave a detail description of the battle of Khe Sanh, focusing on the importance that holding key terrain had on the outcome of battles. This source helped form a basis for my research on how terrain impacted the outcome of individual battles in Vietnam.

Final Historiography

Jeff Lydic

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Throughout my four years at Shippensburg University I have had significant experiences in researching and writing papers while learning to become a historian. Not all of the papers that I have composed while attending school have had a large impact on the development of the skills that are important to a historian. However there are three papers that stand out in my mind as significant learning experiences and quality works that I have accomplished through the years. These papers arise from Recent U.S. history, theory and practice of history, and Seminar in comparative history. These papers along with the teaching that I have received have gone a long way in shaping my ability to effectively gather, organize, and present information in a clear, concise manner.

My first significant research paper at Shippensburg University was from Recent U.S. History. The paper, which was a research of America's history with Al Qaeda and the current threats it posed, was the first major research project that involved the use of primary sources. The paper began by outlining the link that the United States originally had with what is now the Al Qaeda, reaching back to the era where the U.S. openly supported Islamic militants with weapons and training to help defeat the soviets in Afghanistan.¹ I then delved into the explanation of how Bin Laden came to odds with the United States. This was brought into clarity during the first Gulf War when Bin Laden offered the use of his freedom fighters to protect Saudi Arabia but was turned down in favor of Americans. The paper then follows the movement of Bin Laden and the

organization culminating with what were the current conditions in Afghanistan following September 11th, 2001. ²

The paper was very informational but I did not have a sufficient grasp on how to use primary sources. In fact much of the paper was based off of research from secondary sources and the only primary sources that were gathered were from congressional hearings following 2001. There were multiple reasons for this, the paper was a culmination of Individual research without real guidance on how to accomplish the paper. There was no background on how to gather research outside of the university library therefore the paper quality was limited by the knowledge of how to gain outside resources. It would have been helpful at the time to have a better grasp and understanding of how to use these resources and gain more information through online journals and other resources such as Ebsco.

The second paper, from theory and practice of history, titled The Civilian Conservation Corps: Education and Racial Policies, focused on the superior education program the CCC offered to workers, the racial policies which further damaged the advancement of African American's, and the effect these policies had on the future. The paper detailed the CCC from its inception in Roosevelt's first one hundred days all the way to the end of the program prior to World War Two. It tackles many of the issues faced in the camps especially the racial segregation and bias when allowing workers to volunteer. It took many acts by congress to get states to permit black workers to be enrolled in the program and even when they were they were mistreated or given poor

¹ Jeffrey Lydic, *The U.S. and Al Qaeda*, (2007) p. 2

² Ibid p3-10

living conditions and assignments while being led by white officers.³

However it also details the good of the CCC. The education programs offered by the CCC were some of the best of the time and workers were able to gain knowledge in multiple trade areas that they could take with them after their time in the camps.⁴

This paper on the CCC was the first major work in college that I integrated multiple primary and secondary sources. However yet again the information gathering was significantly limited to the University. While there were classes taught on how to gain access to online journals and find articles. It also gave significant information on how to use the library. However there was no emphasis placed on finding research from outside Archives. It was also an attempt to tell more of a guided story about subjects that had already been covered by significant research, not allowing for much individual input.

The final paper, and the one with which I am most proud is my paper from seminar in comparative history, titled War and Environment: The effect of weather, terrain, and geography on the Vietnam War. This paper highlighted the effects that the environment placed on the war in Vietnam focusing on the advances of new technology to defeat it and the failures weather caused on that technology. However most importantly the paper focused on how the surrounding geography outside of Vietnam allowed the war to be fought unconventionally by North Vietnam and highlighted the reason why such large amounts of men and material were able to infiltrate in the country, thus causing the eventual defeat of U.S and Republic of Vietnam forces.⁵

In completing this paper significant emphasis was put on learning about the

³ Jeffrey Lydic, *The Civilian Conservation Corps: Education and Racial policies*, (2007) p4-8

⁴ Ibid p.8-10

⁵ Jeffrey Lydic, *War and the Environment: The affects of weather, terrain, and geography on the Vietnam War*, (2009).

subject of Environmental history and how it linked to political and social history. This helped when creating the thesis for the paper. However the course also highlighted ways to better organize information splitting primary sources into a case study and secondary sources into a historiography, thus making it much easier to present the information and develop the argument. It also allowed students to make a sound argument based on information gathered from outside archives giving the papers more depth. This course utilized all the information we have learned in past courses to make a final paper.

While the History department has a good spread of courses throughout different time periods and subjects there are a few changes that could be made to develop better historians. The most important of which would be to have required courses on writing history papers earlier on in the curriculum, rather than waiting until Junior and Senior year, thus giving students more time to work on writing papers the correct way giving them better experience towards the future. However there has been significant development in my research and writing techniques since I have began my studies the university.

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