

Extended Use of Strategic Air mobility in Cambodia Could Have Won the Vietnam War in 1970

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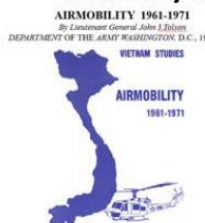
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is partially to trace the evolution of air mobility in the U.S. Army and how it was utilized in the Vietnam War in 1970. The integration of aircraft into the organic structure of the ground forces is as radical a change as the move from the horse to the truck¹. *In the Vietnam War the process was only beginning*. Because this change is not the product of one man or one small group of men but rather a fortunate confluence of technology, tactics, and imagination, proper credit to every responsible individual is impossible. I have tried to utilize my experiences in South Vietnam and Cambodia to describe how air mobility was utilized. It will then describe how strategic air mobility could have been utilized more effectively in Cambodia in 1970. This could have provided the *incomparable opportunity*, as identified by GEN Creighton Abrams, CG MAC-V in 1970, to win the Vietnam War⁴. I will identify some of the key operations and people² who made or could have made major decisions in 1970 that could have won the Vietnam War. This will include five key references which I have used in preparing this Abstract and will be utilized in completing this paper.

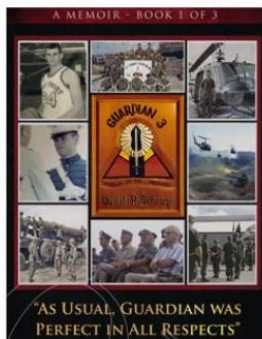
KEY REFERENCES USED FOR THIS PAPER

Over the past two years I have initiated a trilogy of books which cover my three careers. Book 1 is completed and available for purchase on my website, www.danielschrage.com⁵. Illustrated in Figure 1 are five key references which will be used in completing this paper. References 1 to 5 are identified below and included in the Reference Section.

Some Key References 1 to 5 to Explain the Vietnam War




1.Explains Air Mobility Success in Vietnam War




5. Book 1: As Usual Guardian Was Perfect in All Respects


My Conclusion:
 President Nixon and GENs Westmoreland & Abrams partly lost the Vietnam War; however Defense Secretary Melvin Laird did more by not funding Army and accelerating Troop Reduction in 1970-71



2.Documents Poor Decision Making & Execution



3.Search & Destroy Functions With Enemy KIAs as Metric Mainly Used w/ U.S. Forces 1965-1968



4. A Better War :Clear, Hold & Secure Functions for Vietnamizal an Pacification 1968-1972

Figure 1. Key References for Documenting this Paper

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED PAPER

A description of Air Mobility Operations in the Mekong Delta is illustrated in Figure 2. CPT Schrage was a lift ship and gunship platoon leader, as well as an air mission commander, in the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company (AHS) out of Can Tho, South Vietnam from January to June 1970. He then became the S-3 Operations Officer for the 13th Combat Aviation Battalion (CAB) out of Soc Trang, VN from June 1970 to January 1971. CPT Schrage, in November 1970, orchestrated the transfer of the Soc Trang Army Air Field (AAF) to the VNAF and USAF Advisers, as the first AAF transferred under the Vietnamization Program. This began the demise of the 13th CAB and the disruption of the 164th CAG in the Mekong Delta. It became the lost opportunity to win the Vietnam War.



Figure 2. Description of the Mekong Delta, IV CTZ, where 13th CAB Airmobile Operations took place

Airmobile Operations and Capabilities of Army Aviation Demonstrated in Vietnam will be presented. How Gunships and Attack Helicopters saved the Mekong Delta from the NVA/VC in Tet 68 and beyond will be described. The description of this abstract should introduce the topic and provide some background, including a brief assessment of prior work by others. Authors should cite relevant references, outside of their own work, to indicate that they are aware of the technical state of the art and published literature in the area. References 1 to 4 are relevant references in addition to my own work. How does the proposed paper advance the state of the art? How does the proposed paper vary from prior presented/published state-of-the-art results, including, but not limited to the authors' own work. References 1 and 4 advance the state of art on how Strategic Air mobility could have been used in Cambodia to execute the *incomparable opportunity* identified by GEN Abrams, but not executed, during the Cambodia Incursion during the Spring and Early Summer, 1970. Illustrated in Figures 3 are the 13 major operations by South Vietnam Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units supported by U.S. Forces. The US 1st Cav and 25th Infantry Division were involved and had their own helicopter assets. However, the only relevant strategic airmobile operation was the initial insertion of the 9th ARVN Division by the 164th Combat Aviation Group (CAG) up the Mekong River as illustrated in Figure 4. Follow on strategic air mobile operations could have won the war.

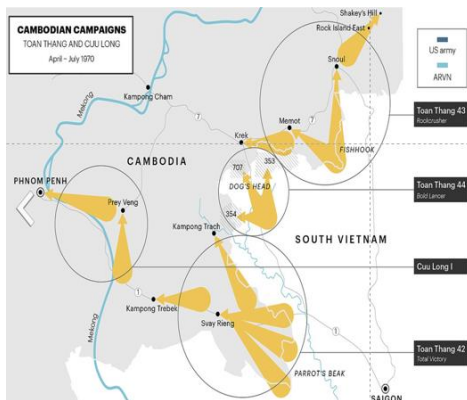


Figure 3. Initial 13 major operations in Cambodia Incursion



Figure 4. 9th ARVN Div. 164th CAG Air Assault

However, the North Vietnam Army (NVA) and their Provisional Headquarters (COSVN) identified in Figure 5 rapidly fled to the north, as illustrated in Figure 6. When GEN Abrams realized this as an *“Incomparable Opportunity”* he is quoted **“What we need right now is another division –go in deep,”** he said in the wake of the initial penetrations. **“We need to go west from where we are, we need to go north and east from where we are. And we need to do it now. It’s moving and –goddamn, goddamn”.** This last was said wistfully, with great sorrow and regret. Someone asked: **“Time to exploit.” Abrams:” “Christ – it’s so clear. Don’t let them pick up the pieces. Don’t let them,” he said very softly.** The 164th CAG with the 9th and 21st ARVN Divisions could have operated out of Phnom Penh Airport. They could have provided the necessary Strategic Air mobility to surround and capture the NVA forces and their headquarters in central and northern Cambodia for executing this *“Incomparable Opportunity”*.

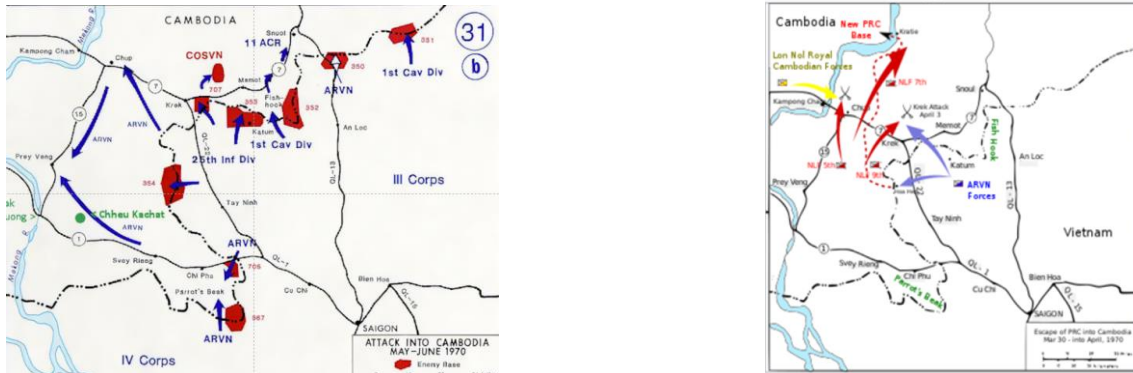


Figure 5. Initial NVA COSVN/PRG Location and ARVN-US Forces Incursion. Figure 6. NVA Fleeing North

The opportunity for Strategic Air mobility Operations by the 164th CAG with the 9th and 21st ARVN Divisions operating out of Phnom Penh Airport could have encircled and captured the fleeing NVA troops and their COSVN and PRG HQs, as identified in Figure 7. This should have been exploited for GEN Abrams’ *“Incomparable Opportunity”*. In March 1970 GEN Lon Nol overthrew the Prince Sihanouk Cambodia Regime. Under Sihanouk Cambodia was considered neutral; however, he allowed the NVA communists to have access to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Sihanoukville port and trail, Figure 8. GEN Lon Nol wrote to President Nixon in June 1970 seeking help and requesting helicopters. His request was delayed until August and was turned down in regard to providing helicopters. GEN Lon Nol did shut down the Sihanouk port and trail; thus eliminating NVA supplies, troops and weapons into the Mekong Delta and Saigon areas for a short time.. US Congress and President Nixon had required all US forces in the Cambodia Incursion to be out of Cambodia by the end of June 1970. This restriction could have and should have been extended for at least two months. Nixon and Abrams applauded the Cambodia Incursion as a tremendous success. They could have gotten this extension which would have provided the chance to implement Strategic Air mobility operations out of Phnom Penh Airport and capture the NVA forces and their headquarters.

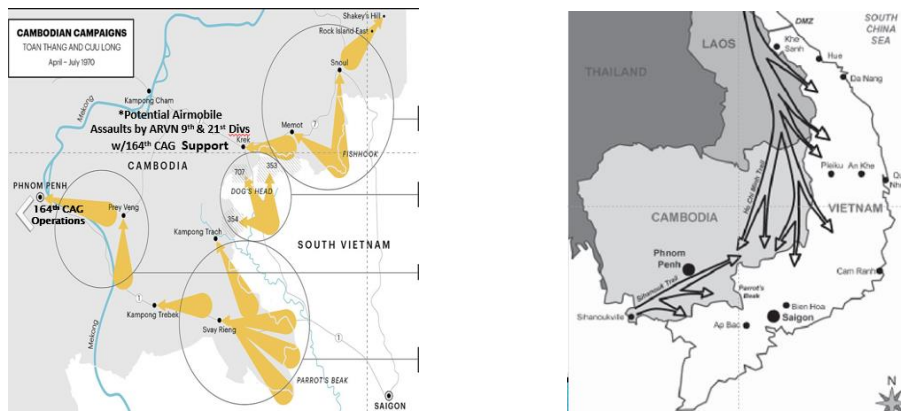


Figure 7. Strategic Air mobility out of Phnom Penh Figure 8. Cambodia Sihanoukville & Trail and Ho Chi Minh Trail

The question of who won the Vietnam War has been a subject of debate, and the answer depends on the definition of victory. Those who argue that the United States won the war point to the fact that the U.S. defeated communist forces during most of Vietnam's major battles. They also assert that the U.S. overall suffered fewer casualties than its opponents. The U.S. military reported 58,220 American casualties. Although North Vietnamese and [Viet Cong](#) casualty counts vary wildly, it is generally understood that they suffered several times the number of American casualties

Those who argue that the United States' opponents won the war cite the United States' overall objectives and outcomes. The United States entered Vietnam with the principal purpose of preventing a communist takeover of the region. In that respect, it failed: the two Vietnams were united under a communist banner in July 1976. Neighboring Laos and Cambodia similarly fell to communists. Furthermore, domestic unrest and the financial cost of war made peace—and troop withdrawals—a necessity, not a choice.

From this author's perspective, the Opportunity to militarily Win the Vietnam War was to execute the *Incomparable Opportunity* to Win the War in Cambodia in 1970⁶. However, this *Incomparable Opportunity* was not executed by GEN Abrams and President Nixon. Evidence that this could have led to winning the Vietnam War was cited by Nixon Advisors, George Shultz and Eric Ehrlichman in a White House Meeting in Fall 1970. George Shultz, coming back from Vietnam said he learned "without Cambodia we would be dead". President Nixon's senior advisor Ehrlichman commented, "Cambodia was the big thing". Listen, he told Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's National Security Adviser (NSA), "Cambodia won the war. I think we have them on the defensive". Kissinger agreed.²

REFERENCES

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5. Schrage, Daniel P., "As Usual, Guardian was Perfect in All Respects", Book 1 of Trilogy 2022.
6. Schrage, Daniel P. "An Incomparable Opportunity to Win the Vietnam War in 1970", Blog, www.danielschrage.com, September 2022.