



# Survey of Counterinsurgency Military Operations in Southeast Asian Countries

Elizabeth Knepler

Department of History, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK



## Summary of Malayan Emergency, 1948-1957

The roots of this struggle are found in the conflict between the native Malay people and Chinese immigrants, each resisting control from the other and opposing equal rights for both groups. In June 1948, the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) began a crusade of arson and murder against European plantation and Chinese workers in Perak, Northern Perak, and Johor Bahru, eliciting a Declaration of Emergency from the British colonial government.

Rather than rely on resources imported from neighboring Thailand, the MRLA amassed food, weapons, and intelligence from Chinese squatters living in the jungle, creating active involvement from the Chinese population and reinforcing a network of support across the country (Kelly, et al., 2010). The British military simultaneously recognized the importance of this group, prompting Sir Henry Gurney to implement Emergency Regulations on the actions of the Chinese settlers, allowing for deportation of detainees, collective punishment, and forced relocation (Stoker, 2022).

Progress in controlling the MRLA insurgency began to be achieved in 1950 through the use of inventive techniques for jungle warfare. Rather than attempting to clear the jungle of enemy troops with large battalions, the focus was placed on small patrols that were able to travel lightly, live off the land, and utilize local knowledge through interpreters (Nagl, 2009).

Initially, the insurrection was viewed as a military problem requiring a military solution, and initial attempts to curb the insurrection focused on strength of forces and large-scale maneuvers through jungle territory. Although large spaces of jungle were deemed as "clear of enemy", Malayan troops were able to escape these military efforts and later return back to deserted camps, reconnecting with established support networks and continuing the insurgency (Nagl, 2009).

The emphasis on this plan is on winning support of the population, with a recognition of the importance of the Chinese squatters and the network of supplies and morale available to MRLA troops. "New Villages" were quickly established to isolate and protect squatters and other citizens, and featured chain link fences, barbed wire, and floodlights, in addition to medical aid units, schools, boy scout troops, village cooperation, community centers, and the Malayan home guard (Stoker, 2022).

Advances in intelligence operations in Malaya ultimately created a structure to incentivize communist troops to surrender for protection and financial rewards, creating a cascade of concessions among members of the MRLA (Walton, 2014). Surrendered enemy personnel were moved to the Psychological Warfare division of the British Special Branch and were responsible for using their unique knowledge to persuade enemy troops to surrender and to convince the Malay citizens the British government is essential, beneficial, and capable of defeating the insurgents. On August 31, 1957, Malaya was granted independence from the British government.

## Discussion

Following the successes of the British army in World War II, a conventional approach to warfare was maintained, and the knowledge gained during jungle combat in Burma and Malaya was not prioritized. However, by 1950, military leadership developed an innovative strategy to address the political and economic climate that created and sustained the MRLA, using the rate of surrendered insurgents as measurement of success (Kilcullen, 2010). In contrast, the American military relied on technology and weaponry to defeat the North Vietnamese Army, neglecting the political climate in Vietnam, as well as the value of intelligence operations (Stoker, 2022). The increase of firepower came at the expense of mobility, speed of operations and human lives, as well as increasing Vietnamese and international opposition (Nagl, 2009). As shown in Figure 1, total U.S. military deaths approximated 58,000 whereas the British military lost 1,400 troops (*Vietnam War Statistics*).

## Figures



Figure 2 (above): Map of Vietnam Theater

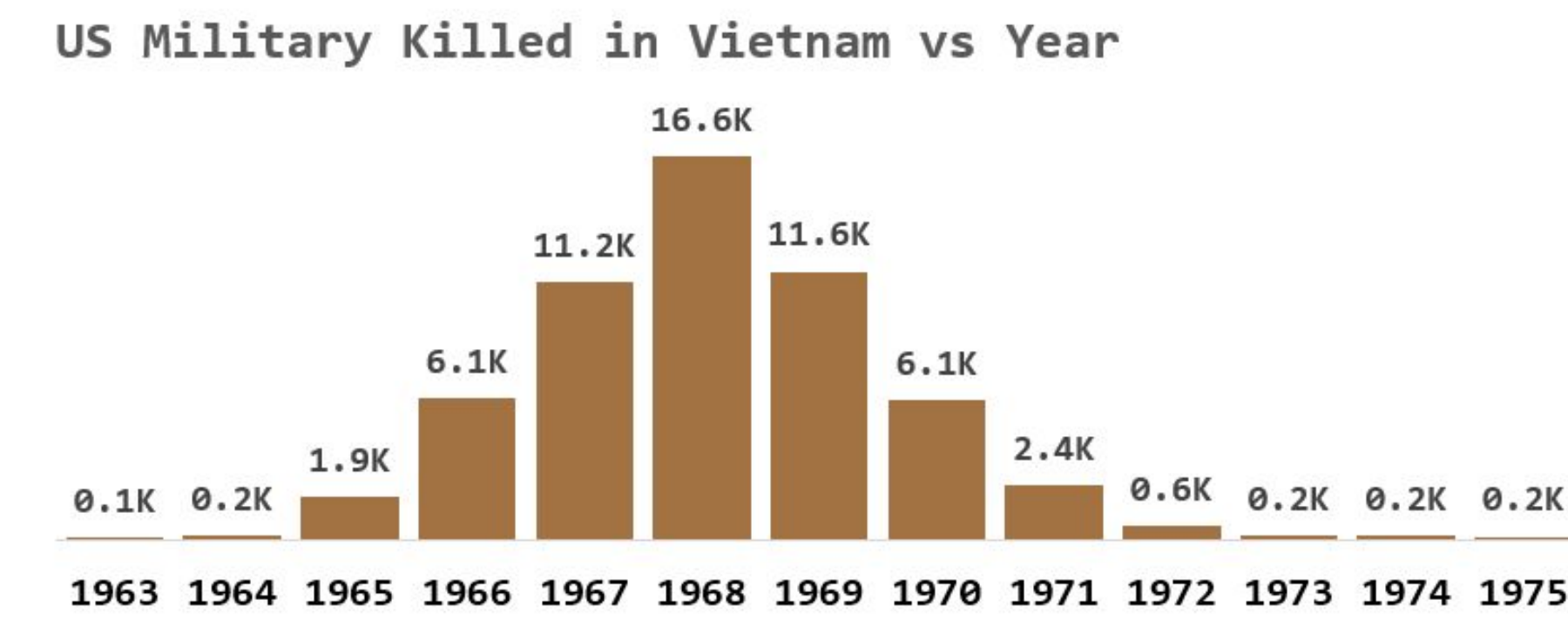


Figure 1: US Military Deaths in Vietnam By Year. All data from the Combat Area Casualties Current File (CACCF) hosted by Duke University. (*Vietnam War Statistics*)

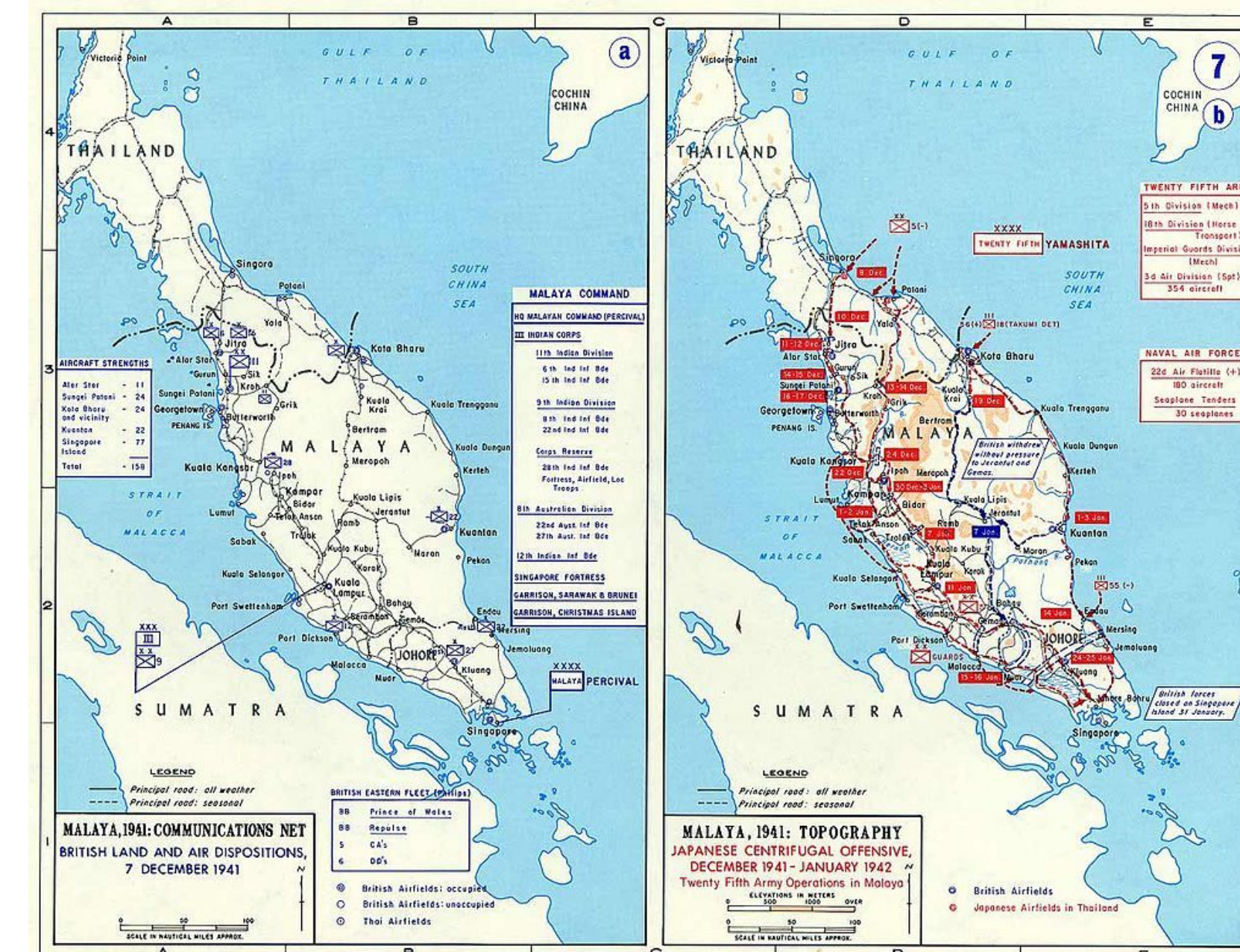


Figure 3 (right): Map of Malayan Campaign

Figure 4: Psychological Warfare Posters Promoting the U.S.-South Vietnamese Cause During the Vietnam War



Figure 5: Photograph of an M48A3 Tank Moving Through Viet Cong Infested Areas Searching for Viet Cong



## Summary of Vietnam Conflict, 1950-1972

The First Indo-China War was begun by the Vietnamese in their fight for freedom from French imperialism, and war began with the Battle in Haiphong Harbor in 1946. Because of the economic instability in France, the United States intervened, funding eighty percent of the war effort and sent a total of \$2.6 billion in aid from 1950 to 1954. Using their geographical advantage of higher ground, the Vietnamese army surrounded the French positions and kept them in siege for nearly two months. The French surrendered on May 7, 1954, concluded the First Indo-China War and recognized Vietnam as an independent country (Stoker, 2022).

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by Congress in 1964 as a response to aggression from the North Vietnamese Army. However, President Nixon chose a different tactic than simply patrolling waterways and supported stronger military action against the North Vietnamese Army, sending air power over the border of Cambodia during a plan called Operation Menu (Smith, 1994). This operation was in effect for approximately fourteen months, March 1969 to May 1970, and dropped one hundred thousand tons of bombs on enemy strongholds. Nixon continued American military investment in Vietnam by establishing Operation Linebacker I, an airpower campaign which took place May-October 1972. This campaign dropped bombs in controversial areas, including places south of the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel, and closer to populated cities (Stoker, 2022).

Operation Rolling Thunder, an air campaign led by the United States military against the North Vietnamese, began in March 1965. The objective of the campaign was to display American air power by bombing select targets and intimidate the North Vietnamese into opening negotiations (Stoker, 2022). The Department of Defense had chosen ninety-four targets between the 11th and 17th parallels, avoiding highly populated areas, and limiting the proximity of bombs to Hanoi and the Haiphong Harbor. Bombing runs were scheduled twice a week for eight weeks. Operation Rolling Thunder left staggering destruction in its wake and by the end of 1965, twenty-five thousand buildings, over six hundred bridges, and forty radar sites had been destroyed and millions of citizens left homeless (Smith, 1994). By 1967, the United States had dropped more tons of bombs on North Vietnam than on Germany, Japan, and Italy during the second world war. This excessive bombing campaign is demonstrative of the American strategy during the Vietnam War, the strategy that the United States would be victorious over the Vietnamese simply because the military had more resources and more technology, instead of adapting the warfare to the country and terrain (Kelly et al., 2010).

Upon the removal of American troops, the Vietnam War became a true civil war, North Vietnamese against South Vietnamese and communism versus anti-communism. When Vietnam established a communist government as a united nation, the domino effect theory in regards to Southeast Asia was partially proven correct when Cambodia came under the communist rule of Pol Pot in 1975.

## Literature Cited

- Kelly, J. D., Jauregui, B., Mitchell, S. T., & Walton, J. (2010). *Anthropology and global counterinsurgency*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kilcullen, D. (2010). *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Nagl, J. A. (2009). *Learning to eat soup with a knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, J. T. (1994). *Rolling Thunder: The American strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam 1964-68*. Air Research.
- Stoker, Donald. (2022). *Why America loses wars: Limited war and Us strategy from the Korean War to the present*. Cambridge University Press.
- Walton, C. (2014). *Empire of secrets*. William Collins.
- 1968 Vietnam War Statistics. Math Encounters Blog. (2018, July 23).