

## Our Heritage

# New Look at Vietnam War Support

By Dr. Martin K. Gordon

The Corporate History Branch recently completed the first exhibit on the Vietnam War for the NGA Museum in St. Louis. Before preparation of this exhibit, there were no accounts that outlined the contributions of all of NGA's predecessor organizations to American participation in that war. NGA now has a record of the work done back then, thanks to the participation of several retirees: Al Anderson, Charles Bates, Wells Huff, Richard Randall and Vance Sprague.

Just as today's intelligence operations require close collaboration by NGA with other intelligence agencies, the contributions of several organizations were involved in preparing for and supporting our nation's participation in the Vietnam War. Long before the United States formally became militarily engaged in Southeast Asia, the

Army Map Service (AMS), Aeronautical Chart and Information Center (ACIC) and National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) collected data and prepared analyses for that region.

During the tense summer of 1954, there was a strong possibility of U.S. intervention to help the French in their fight for control against the Communist Viet Minh after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. AMS provided analyses of the terrain around the cities of Hanoi and Saigon in case the United States intervened.

The United States did not intervene, but interest in that region continued to grow.

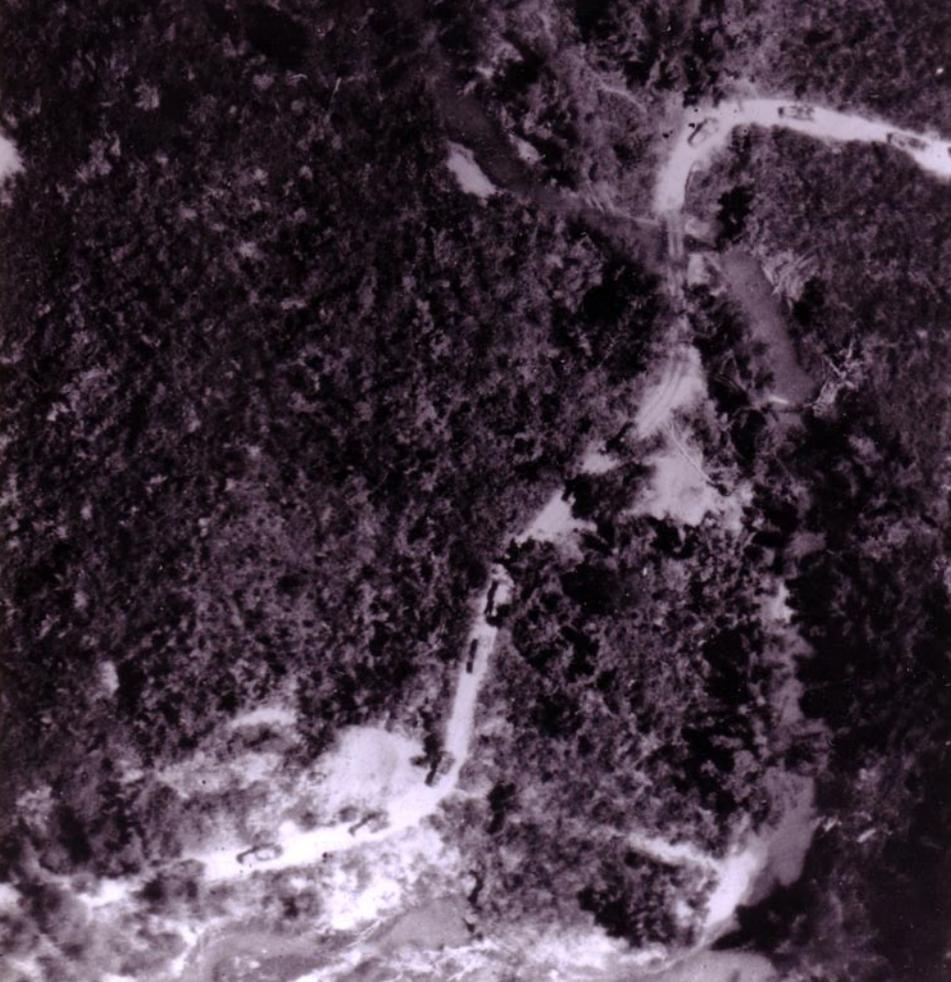
Division of the country followed the French defeat in 1954. In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, contractors assisted the AMS in Bethesda, Md., with aerial photography, and the agency sent survey parties into the region. As a result, AMS created the first accurate maps of Vietnam.

In 1959 President Dwight Eisenhower asked for U-2 missions in Vietnam and the surrounding region and tasked NPIC in Washington, D.C., to study the resultant photographs. NPIC analysts began visits to the region to study and report on the growing conflict between North and South Vietnam. By 1962 NPIC analysts were conducting bomb-damage assessments, identifying possible targets, seeing through enemy deceptions and producing a number of intelligence assessments.

As demands for targeting information grew, along with American involvement on the side of South Vietnam, ACIC in St. Louis deployed a new database targeting system. It enabled attacking American

Air Force reconnaissance photography of the Hanoi railroad and highway bridge, taken in May 1968, shows repair work under way on spans destroyed before a month-old bombing halt. In the upper right are two temporary pontoon bridges for foot and motor traffic. Organizations that preceded NGA supported the American war effort with many new methods and products.





*A truck convoy heads south toward the South Vietnam border in January 1968, days before the Tet offensive.*

and allied pilots to more accurately hit targets and avoid Communist air defenses. Exploiting SR-71 photography sent to St. Louis, analysts would identify the exact coordinates of newly found targets and send that information back to Vietnam for action. The process took an hour.

Increasing American military involvement required accurate information about the names of natural and cultural features in that country and adjoining countries for application to maps and charts and for overall operational purposes. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), headquartered in the Interior Department, provided guidelines for standardizing such names. The AMS survey parties collected names data in the field for topographic maps of Vietnam and other countries, and similar staffs at the Naval Oceanographic Office and ACIC provided names for nautical and aeronautical charts, respectively. Country gazetteers with

standardized names were published to meet various requirements.

Meanwhile, the Army Map Service adapted the land-based, low-frequency Long Range Navigation (LORAN) system to record the location of aeri ally seeded sensors being dropped to help allied forces interdict North Vietnamese supply and troop movements into South Vietnam. At the same time, AMS provided its traditional mapping support to the Army.

As for Navy involvement, it was evident by November 1965, shortly after our first ground combat troops landed, that coastal charts for South Vietnam, based on Japanese hydrography from World War II, were unreliable, particularly in the river deltas. Consequently, over the next three years the Naval Oceanographic Office completed comprehensive geodetic, coastal and harbor surveys of that complex coastline using a series of survey vessels. Among these were the USS Maury, USS Tanner, USS Serrano, USS Sheldrake and USS Towhee. In addition, during December 1966, the Naval Oceanographic Office established a branch office in Saigon to provide updated nautical charts and publications for use by local fleet and Marine Corps units in their blockade, interdiction and naval air support actions.

As the war moved toward a conclusion, the Department of Defense probed for ways of saving money. At the same time, the military services' use of digital and satellite technology for mapping, charting and geodesy continued to grow. Both to save money and to better exploit these new tools, the Department of Defense merged the services' mapping organizations, establishing the Defense Mapping Agency in 1972.

NGA's Vietnam War exhibit will be open to the public. Watch the NGA home page at [www.nga.mil](http://www.nga.mil) for information as it becomes available.