



Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954-1965

by **J. P. Harris**

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During its struggle for survival from 1954 to 1975, the region known as the Central Highlands was the strategically vital high ground for the South Vietnamese state. Successive South Vietnamese governments, their American allies, and their Communist enemies all realized early on the fundamental importance of this region. Paul Harris's new book, based on research in American archives and the use of Vietnamese Communist literature on a very large scale, examines the struggle for this region from the mid-1950s, tracing its evolution from subversion through insurgency and counterinsurgency to the bigger battles of 1965.

The rugged mountains, high plateaus, and dense jungles of the Central Highlands seemed as forbidding to most Vietnamese as it did to most Americans. During 1954 to 1965, the great majority of its inhabitants were not ethnic Vietnamese. Ngo Dinh Diem's regime initially supported an American counterinsurgency alliance with the Highlanders only to turn dramatically against it.

As the war progressed, however, the Central Highlands became increasingly important. It was the area through which most branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail passed. With its rugged, jungle-clad terrain, it also seemed to the North Vietnamese the best place to destroy the elite of South Vietnam's armed forces and to

fight initial battles with the Americans. For many North Vietnamese, however, the Central Highlands became a living hell of starvation and disease. Even before the arrival of the American 1st Cavalry Division, the Communists were generally unable to win the decisive victories they sought in this region.

Harris's study culminates with an account of the campaign in Pleiku province in October to November – a campaign that led to dramatic clashes between the Americans and the North Vietnamese in the Ia Drang valley. Harris's analysis overturns many of the accepted accounts about NVA, US, and ARVN performances.

J. P. Harris is a senior lecturer in war studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He is the author of *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, among many other books of military history.

Review

- "Vietnam's High Ground provides a new perspective on the Vietnam War in the Central Highlands. The author closes with the battles in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 that set the tone for U.S. Army combat operations that followed. However, the preponderance of the book focuses on a comprehensive discussion of the political and military events that led up to the fateful battles in this strategically critical region. Based on new and extensive documentation available from both sides of the conflict, this book is an important and valuable addition to the historiography of the Vietnam War."

– **James H. Willbanks**, author of *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*

- "Using newly available documentation from both sides of the conflict, Harris paints a vivid picture of the history of the Central Highlands and of the difficulties that the combatants faced in attempting to gain control of this extremely difficult but absolutely vital theater of operations from the earliest days of the Vietnam conflict up through the initial arrival of US ground combat units in the summer and fall of 1965. His well-balanced account sheds new light on this little-known period and provides valuable insights into the origins and challenges of the conflict in the Central Highlands, the numerous different ethnic minority tribes who lived there, and the mistakes both sides made in the conduct of their military operations. His detailed, judicious, and well-sourced analysis of the climactic battles in the Ia Drang is particularly insightful."

– **Merle Pribbenow**, author of *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*

- "Harris' is the first account that attempts to synthesize the vastly complex war effort in the Central Highlands. All too often ignored in most histories, developments in the region, both military and social, were critical to deciding the victor in the Vietnam War. *Vietnam's High Ground* fills a yawning historiographical void, detailing events in the Central Highlands during the formative years of the conflict in Vietnam from 1954-1965 – an under researched period when the war was much more a Vietnamese war; years that set the stage for America's flawed military alliance with the Republic of Vietnam. From the birth of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, to the intricate social interactions of competing ethnic and political groups, to the tactical ebb and flow of war, *Vietnam's High Ground* provides invaluable and compelling coverage that will impact the field for years. Anyone who is interested in the history of the Vietnam War should take note of Harris' important contribution.

– **Andrew Wiest**, author of *The Boys of '67: Charlie Company's War in Vietnam*

"Harris has produced a carefully documented and lucidly written study of the early years of the Vietnam War in the strategically important central highlands. He expands our understanding of the conflict prior to 1965, a relatively understudied subject, and offers a fresh analysis of the 1965 Pleiku campaign, which culminated in the famous battles in the Ia Drang river valley. Blending modesty, insightfulness, and objectivity, Harris pulls no punches and takes no sides. The result is an illuminating good read."

– **Andrew J. Birtle**, author of *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976*