Throughout history there are stories of much smaller and less well trained armies defeating their much stronger and better equipped enemies. There are many differing factors as to why the smaller armies win but there are several common links. All of the small armies used guerilla tactics; refusing to use traditional military tactics that their opponents prefer to use and relying on their knowledge of the area. Also, all of the armies were fighting on their American “Minute-men” used a hit-and-run strategy as well as Native American tactics to defeat the strongest army of their time, Britain. The IRA in North Ireland were able to avoid defeat by striking quickly and then disappearing into the general public, camouflaging themselves into the crowd and successfully avoiding the military. In Vietnam the NLF outsmarted the most powerful army of its time not only by using similar hit-and-run tactics but also with the help of the Cu Chi Tunnels, a complex of underground construction that included hospitals, armories, kitchens, barracks, as well as deadly traps for any unwelcome guests. The reason that the NLF was so effective against the much stronger US military is because of their use of this elaborate labyrinth which allowed them to out maneuver their opponents.

“The underground tunnels of Cu Chi were the most complex part of a network that-at the height of the Vietnam War in the mid-sixties-stretched from the gates of Saigon to the border with Cambodia”.[[1]](#footnote-1) These tunnels were not made for the Vietnamese fight against the Americans. Instead these tunnels were made over the years, through various invasions the Vietnamese built the tunnels and connected them until they had a network of tunnels that allowed free passage throughout the country with no person above the ground being at all aware of the traffic below their feet. This quick transportation of supplies and soldiers is what allowed the NLF to strike quickly at the US and ARVN and then disappear only to reappear much farther away. Furthermore these tunnels were instrumental in the 1968 Tet Offensive as it allowed for the number of NLF soldiers to be severely under estimated as well as enabling seamless communication and organization for the simultaneous strikes. Americans soon came to fear going into the tunnels in order to smoke out the NLF as only the Vietnamese knew the layout of the maze and there was little to no light, literally the US soldiers were going into a dark void.

Generations of soldiers fought in the same tunnels, fathers fought in the tunnels against the French and their sons fought against the Americans in the same network. “We literally dug for thirty years, usually in the dark, squatting down. We carved out about a meter every eight hours, and women distributed the earth on the surface hiding it under fallen leaves”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, these tunnels were not simply for troop movement. The system of tunnels were multistoried, “three levels as much as 23 feet deep” and contained doors that were water, air, and gas tight as well as blast resistant[[3]](#footnote-3). There were hospitals, bunks, wells, conference rooms, armories, kitchens, and even clean water; all underground. The tunnels utilized an A-frame construction which allowed them to be incredibly strong, holding up the weight of American tanks and not caving in. Even 6,000 tons of bombs dropped by American aircraft were unable to destroy the network. In order to find the tunnels the US turned Cu Chi into the “most bombed, shelled, gassed, defoliated, and generally devastated area in the history of warfare. For years, most of Cu Chi suffered the fate of being a ““free strike zone.”” That meant that random artillery fire, known as “harassment and interdiction,” rained upon it by night; bomber pilots were encouraged to offload unused explosives and napalm over Cu Chi before returning to base”.[[4]](#footnote-4) And yet still the tunnel system protected the NLF soldiers from being discovered and still stands.

For obvious reasons the American forces were very interested in expelling the Vietnamese from their tunnel sanctuary. Using a combination of “flooding, tear gas, and flames” the US attempted to force out the NLF.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, the NLF had counters for almost all of these tactics. They would ring the entrances with lime to throw off the dog and they had interior doors that were water and air tight to prevent flooding; both chemical and liquid. Furthermore the wood that they used was very resistant to fire. The only tactic that they found to be vaguely effective was to send one of their own in. The term “tunnel rat” is actually derived from this, the smallest and slimmest of US troops were given special training to go into the tunnels and eliminate the NLF opposition. “Then it came-the sought after opening! Platoon Sergeant Stewart L. Green, a wiry 130 pound soldier, jumped from the ground with a curse...as he disturbed he dead leaves on the ground with the muzzle of his rifle, he saw what had ““bit”” him: a nail”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Another problem was that the entrances to the tunnels were very well camouflaged which meant and often only the NLF knew where the exact location was; “a square manhole…when we [the author] were all in, the manhole was covered with earth and leaves, all traces of our tracks [were] erased”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even at the end of the war the tunnels were still regarded with an aura of respect by the American forces, they were the one place that most were reluctant to go into.

Today the Cu Chi tunnels stand as a symbol of the war, a “war memorial park”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Travelers have the “opportunity to crawl through a section of tunnel that has been widened to accommodate Westerners”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Cu Chi, much like the entirety of Vietnam, has moved on from the war. However, the “people of Cu Chi went to work on the tunnels once again, widening parts of them and adding steps and lighting”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Also on display are also many of the “booby traps used by the Vietcong, from the hidden trap doors in the ground, to doors that swing round to reveal rows of razor sharp bamboo spikes”.[[11]](#footnote-11) However perhaps the most interesting part of the “museum” is the shooting range which “for $26 U.S., help tourists feel like terrorists”.[[12]](#footnote-12) The complex of tunnels is, in all of Vietnam, the place that has been touched the least by the war. Here the war is still alive and offers a window to the past, making it the best place to learn about what Vietnam was like during the war.

There is a long history of small armies defeating much larger ones. And while there are numerous factors which go into the victory there are always two factors that allow the less equipped military to defeat their empirical enemy. Those factors are guerilla tactics which go against conventional warfare, and knowledge about the terrain. In Vietnam the NLF had another advantage. The tunnel complex focused in Cu Chi allowed the NLF to fight a much stronger American force because it protected them from US bombing, allowed for quick and unhindered movement of troops, and provided a safe area for the wounded, tired, and NLF low on supplies. These tunnels, made over decades and during several wars, forced the US to fight on the terms of the NLF. Despite the best efforts of the US and South Vietnamese military the tunnels remained impregnable and camouflaged. Much like the original guerilla tactics of the American “minute-men” this unprecedented tactic is what gave the NLF the edge against a superior fighting force.

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2. James Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1982), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Mangold, *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harrison, *Endless War,* 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Albert N. Garland, *Infantry in Vietnam* (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, 1982), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wilfred G. Burchett, *Inside Story of the Guerilla War* (New York, NY: International Publishers), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)