

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

BUYING TIME 1965-1966



Cover: Men of Company C, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, draw sniper fire while on a mission in Bien Hoa Province east of Saigon. (*National Archives*)

BUYING TIME 1965-1966



by
Frank L. Jones

Center of Military History
United States Army
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Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive conflict. Now almost fifty years after the beginning of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, the war has faded from much of America's consciousness. Over half of the U.S. population was born after the war and has no direct memory of the conflict, yet this does not lessen its importance. The massive American commitment—political, military, and diplomatic—to the independence of South Vietnam beginning in the 1950s and continuing with U.S. direct combat operations in the 1960s and early 1970s makes it important to remember those who served.

U.S. involvement in this corner of Southeast Asia began after World War II when Vietnam was fighting for independence from France. Although generally favoring Vietnamese independence, the United States supported France because the rebels—or Viet Minh—were led by Communists and in the days of the Cold War U.S. officials considered any and all Communists to be little more than the puppets of Moscow and Beijing. France's defeat in 1954, the bifurcation of Vietnam into a Communist North and non-Communist South, and America's assumption of the job of training the armed forces of the newly created non-Communist Republic of Vietnam pulled the United States deeper into the conflict. Framed primarily as a fight to defend democracy against the forces of international communism, the United States gradually committed more troops and materiel to fight Communist-led Southern guerrillas (or Viet Cong) and the regular military forces sent to South Vietnam by the politburo in Hanoi.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States had already invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the fight to build a secure and stable South Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly until by 1969 the United States had over 365,000 soldiers in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of other

servicemen and women throughout the Pacific area in direct support of operations. The war saw many technological innovations including the massive use of helicopters, wide-scale use of computers, sophisticated psychological operations, new concepts of counterinsurgency, and major advances in military medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden of battle was still borne by the foot soldiers on the ground who slogged over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military and political effort by the United States was, however, continuously matched by the determination of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of American forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the U.S. military role. The continued existence of an independent South Vietnam, however, was of short duration. Two years after the American exit the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam and sealed its victory in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who served in Vietnam did so in the uniform of the United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

RICHARD W. STEWART
Chief Historian

Buying Time, 1965–1966

In January 1965, the principal U.S. ally against communism in Southeast Asia, the Republic of (South) Vietnam, appeared to be headed for collapse. Armed revolutionaries fighting a proxy war on behalf of Communist North Vietnam held the political and military initiative. The insurgents controlled nearly half of South Vietnam's countryside and almost a third of its population. The U.S.-trained South Vietnamese Army was losing soldiers and equipment at an alarming rate. Regiment-size enemy units threatened the nation's capital, Saigon, and the fractious coalition of civilian and military officials who governed the country seemed unable to deal with the crisis. President Lyndon B. Johnson and his National Security Council concluded that the Republic of Vietnam could only survive if the United States took a more active part in the war.

America's military involvement in Vietnam began twenty years earlier when a team of agents from the Office of Strategic Services, predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency, parachuted into northern Vietnam during the closing months of World War II. The team formed an alliance with Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or League for the Independence of Vietnam) guerrilla army, which had been fighting the Japanese troops occupying the former French colony since 1941. Needing the Viet Minh's help in rescuing downed Allied airmen, the United States overlooked the fact that Ho Chi Minh was also a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary who had been trying to end French colonial rule since the 1920s. That became impossible to ignore in late August 1945, however, when Japan surrendered to the Allies and Ho's victorious army seized control of Hanoi. France,

still stinging from its wartime humiliation, demanded the restoration of its Indochinese colonies. Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh army retreated to the countryside, but neither the Communists nor many Vietnamese nationalists were willing to abandon the dream of Vietnamese independence. Within two years, Ho and his followers were at war with the French colonial government.

This local conflict became a major U.S. concern after Mao Zedong's Red Army completed its conquest of mainland China in late 1949. Mao's government began shipping large quantities of military equipment to the Viet Minh. With those arms and a host of Chinese military advisers, Ho Chi Minh's fighters began to defeat the French and the Vietnamese forces representing the French-sponsored government led by Emperor Bao Dai. Then, in the summer of 1950, U.S. fears about the spread of communism in Asia quickened when North Korea, a close ally of Communist China and the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea in a bid to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force. The fighting in Vietnam and Korea seemed to prove that both Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong were eager to support proxy wars that promoted the spread of communism. France's imperial conflict in Southeast Asia had become a Cold War battleground for the United States. Had times been different and there not been a perception that it was engaged in a global struggle against communism, the United States might have supported Vietnamese independence. But Cold War concerns and the need to keep France as a strong ally in both Asia and Europe led the United States to take a different course. On the one hand, it pressed France to grant the non-Communist states of Indochina greater autonomy. On the other, it backed France in its struggle against the Viet Minh.

In September 1950, President Harry S. Truman directed the formation of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to help the French colonial forces absorb the growing volume of U.S. military equipment that was flowing into Vietnam. Over the next four years, this small support group supervised the transfer of nearly one billion dollars' worth of American aid. Despite that assistance, the French colonial army gradually lost control over most of northern and central Vietnam. Following a crushing defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the government in Paris agreed to negotiate an end to the war and to renounce its colonial claims in Southeast Asia.

The resulting Geneva Peace Accords of 1954 divided Vietnam into two halves, leaving Ho Chi Minh's Communist Lao Dong (People's Worker) Party in control of the territory north of the 17th Parallel and a non-Communist government led by Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem in charge of the south. The accords stipulated that a national referendum be held in 1956 to reunify Vietnam under a single government, but neither Diem nor the United States was willing to risk a Communist electoral victory. After defeating his political rivals in 1955 and consolidating a base of power in Saigon, Diem declared the formation of the Republic of Vietnam with himself as its president.

The new state of South Vietnam resembled an upright crescent nearly 1,100 kilometers in length, with a width of about 70 kilometers at its slender top growing to approximately 200 kilometers at its broader base. The majority of the nation's 15 million inhabitants resided in the lowlands that bordered South Vietnam's long coast or in the Mekong Delta that formed a broad triangular plain south of Saigon. Rugged mountains and thick forests blanketed the interior of northern and central South Vietnam, the traditional homeland of the Mon-Khmer tribal people the French called Montagnards (or "mountain dwellers"). South Vietnam was mainly a rural society, with some 80 percent of its population engaged in farming, fishing, and hunting, or working in agricultural industries such as salt production, brick making, and rubber tree harvesting. The main exception to that rule was Saigon and its 1.5 million people—a mixture of government employees, business people, shop owners, and manual laborers—crowded into about ten square kilometers at the northeastern edge of the Mekong Delta. There in the political and commercial hub of South Vietnam, a few blocks from Ngo Dinh Diem's presidential palace, the United States established its new MAAG headquarters.

Between 1956 and 1959, the U.S. advisory mission to South Vietnam remained limited, but that began to change when Ho Chi Minh's followers in the South—President Diem derisively called them "Viet Cong" (Communist traitors to Vietnam)—launched an armed uprising in early 1960. When the insurgency gained momentum in early 1961, the new U.S. president, John F. Kennedy, began sending additional advisers and support units to Vietnam. To keep pace with the growing U.S. assistance program, President Kennedy authorized the formation of a new joint headquarters, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), in



A U.S. adviser accompanies South Vietnamese troops during a mission in Long An Province southwest of Saigon.

February 1962. Despite MACV's support, the South Vietnamese armed forces failed to contain the growing Viet Cong insurgency, which spread to nearly every corner of the country. After the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 and the military coup that had ended Diem's life a few weeks earlier, Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's successor, vowed to continue the U.S. advisory mission. He issued National Security Action Memorandum 288 in March 1964 to make clear his determination to preserve "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam." The coming year would test just how far the United States was prepared to go in order to secure that aim (*Map 1*).

STRATEGIC SETTING

General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. Army officer who led MACV, controlled approximately 23,000 uniformed personnel at the beginning of 1965. MACV headquarters consisted of slightly more than 1,000 personnel who mainly worked in downtown Saigon. Around 15,000 Army troops served as field advisers; one-third of those soldiers worked directly with South Vietnamese units or regional headquarters, while the remaining two-thirds provided logistical, administrative, and technical support to MACV and South Vietnamese personnel. Another 6,000 or so personnel from the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps worked



Map 1

with their branch counterparts at a dozen major airbases and naval stations across South Vietnam. The largest single Army component within MACV was the 1,200-man U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group, also known as the Green Berets. In addition to training the South Vietnamese Special Forces, the Green Berets also operated from more than forty remote camps that monitored enemy infiltration from Laos and Cambodia. Most of these outposts contained a dozen Green Berets, a comparable number of South Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers, and between 200 to 900 Vietnamese irregulars, most of them ethnic Montagnards recruited from the highland tribes. Another service component within MACV, the U.S. Air Force 2d Air Division, provided the ground troops with logistical and combat support.

The South Vietnamese regular forces that MACV helped train and support numbered around 250,000 personnel. Of those, 220,000 belonged to the South Vietnamese Army. Organized along American lines, the regular army consisted of ten light infantry divisions serving under four regional headquarters—the I Corps Tactical Zone at Da Nang on the northern coast; the II Corps Tactical Zone at Pleiku City in the Central Highlands; the III Corps Tactical Zone at Bien Hoa to the east of Saigon; and the IV Corps Tactical Zone at Can Tho in the heart of the Mekong Delta. Organized around three infantry regiments backed by a field artillery battalion and some engineers, the divisions were principally equipped with U.S. gear from World War II and the



General Westmoreland addresses men of the 1st Cavalry Division.

Korean War. Most of the ninety-three infantry battalions were tied to a particular province or district; rarely could an entire regiment be assembled for an operation (*Map 2*).

The South Vietnamese lieutenant generals who commanded each corps supported those divisions with a total of eight separate battalions of artillery, four battalion-size armored cavalry groups, and twenty ranger battalions. The corps commanders reported to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) in Saigon, which controlled a strategic reserve of six Airborne and five Marine battalions—some 10,000 well-trained and politically reliable troops—that could be deployed to any part of the country on short notice. Also under JGS control, the South Vietnamese Air Force consisted of 11,000 personnel and fifteen squadrons of non-jet aircraft, while the South Vietnamese Navy and its 8,000 sailors manned a small fleet of armed coastal junks and river assault boats.

In addition to those regular armed forces, the South Vietnamese government fielded another 264,000 paramilitary soldiers who performed local security missions in the countryside. Known as the Popular and the Regional Forces, these lightly armed paramilitary troops operated under the control of the 44 province and 242 district chiefs. Relatively poorly trained and equipped, the Popular and Regional Forces were—together with another 97,000 irregulars, militia, and police—the first line of defense in most villages and hamlets. MACV was stretched thin supporting the regular South Vietnamese Army, but General Westmoreland hoped to expand the amount of U.S. assistance given to the rural security forces once resources became available.

The insurgent forces trying to topple South Vietnam's government numbered roughly 170,000 armed fighters at the beginning of 1965. Divided into five categories—main force, local force, rear service, guerrilla, and political cadre—these troops were mostly southern-born Vietnamese, many of whom had fought for the Viet Minh against the French, and some of whom had regrouped in the North after 1954 to receive military and political training before infiltrating back into the South to lead the revolution. About a third of the fighters belonged to main force units of the *People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF)*. These well-equipped battalions and regiments operated across provincial boundaries, either under regional military headquarters known as *Fronts* or under the control of the *Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)*, a political-military body that supervised the war in the lower half of



Map 2

South Vietnam. The second type of enemy formation, local force units, usually operated in a specific district under the command of a local Viet Cong party committee. Rear service troops maintained the logistical channels that connected the Communist supply dumps in Cambodia and Laos to forward base areas, usually located in mountainous or heavily forested areas, across South Vietnam. The Viet Cong guerrilla force—part-time soldiers who lived and worked in a specific village or hamlet—helped protect the political cadre, or infrastructure personnel, who acted as a shadow government, collected taxes, recruited new fighters, and supervised the distribution of war material. Supplementing the Southerners were about 10,000 soldiers from the *People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)*, which reported to the North Vietnamese Ministry of Defense. Whether from the North or the South, all Vietnamese Communist soldiers came under the authority of the Lao Dong Party and its leading officials—President Ho Chi Minh, First Secretary Le Duan, Minister of Defense General Vo Nguyen Giap, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, and about a dozen others—who held the reins of power in North Vietnam.

As the year 1965 began, U.S. policymakers were both deeply worried about the situation in Vietnam and divided about what should be done about it. Many feared that South Vietnam could not be saved, but in the context of the global war on communism, few believed that it was politically and strategically acceptable for the United States to allow South Vietnam to fall without putting up more of a fight. If, as official policy stated, the United States was truly dedicated to the preservation of a free, independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, a few senior officials, primarily in the Army and Marine Corps, believed that the United States would have no choice but to deploy large ground forces in a bid to defeat the Communists militarily, or at least to bring them to the negotiation table on favorable terms, as had occurred in Korea. Others thought that a full-fledged war was undesirable, unlikely to achieve victory, and domestically unsustainable. They preferred using limited military means to coerce the Communists into accepting South Vietnam's independence. Should North Vietnam not back down, the United States could apply additional pressure in carefully calibrated doses until the enemy backed off. It was this approach, favored by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam and retired Army General Maxwell D. Taylor, and many other senior policy personnel, that

President Johnson initially selected. No one in the U.S. government, however, seemed to have a clear vision of how the crisis might end if the Communist leadership in Hanoi refused to be cowered.

Unfortunately, North Vietnam's leaders had no intention of backing down. Although they feared U.S. military intervention, they regarded the reunification of Vietnam under communism as nonnegotiable, and they were prepared to pay a steep price to obtain it. Indeed, they had already committed themselves to launching a major offensive in early 1965, one bolstered by the infusion of North Vietnamese Army divisions, to try to make South Vietnam's position untenable before a possible U.S. intervention. The two nations were thus on a collision course. One, North Vietnam, was advancing aggressively forward toward conquering South Vietnam. The other, the United States, was moving hesitantly and with ambivalence toward a deeper involvement of undetermined proportions to save South Vietnam. Neither antagonist had a firm grasp on a situation that would soon spiral out of control.

OPERATIONS

THE FIRST COMBAT TROOPS ARRIVE

The tipping point for U.S. intervention came on 7 February when Viet Cong sappers and mortar teams attacked a U.S. barracks and airfield near Pleiku City in the Central Highlands. The raid, which killed 8 Americans and wounded 126 others, also destroyed or damaged 25 aircraft. A similar event occurred three days later when Viet Cong guerrillas attacked a U.S. enlisted men's billet in the port city of Qui Nhon. The Johnson administration, already looking for a reason to employ stronger coercive measures against North Vietnam, seized the moment. "We have no choice now but to clear the decks," President Johnson told the American public, "and make absolutely clear our determination to back South Vietnam in its fight to maintain its independence" (*Map 3*).

In response to the attacks on Pleiku City and Qui Nhon, the United States launched a flurry of reprisal air raids in the southern portion of North Vietnam. When those attacks failed to elicit any diplomatic response from Hanoi, President Johnson authorized the commencement of a strategic bombing campaign known as ROLLING THUNDER. Ambassador Taylor championed the bombing campaign, believing it would persuade North Vietnam to end its support for the insurgency in the South.



Map 3

General Westmorland also welcomed the measure, describing it as a “program of measured and limited air action.” He did not think, however, that aerial bombing alone would be sufficient to turn the tide. In the “Commander’s Estimate of the Military Situation in South Vietnam” that he prepared for his superiors in March 1965, the MACV chief concluded that a limited number of U.S. combat forces—several Army and Marine brigades with the necessary supporting units—should be deployed at once to stabilize the faltering republic. The recent Viet Cong attacks had already demonstrated that the air campaign would be in jeopardy unless U.S. air bases and installations in South Vietnam could be properly protected.

Pulled by conflicting impulses to win—or at least not immediately lose—the Cold War in Southeast Asia, to avoid a major confrontation, and to press forward with an aggressive agenda of socioeconomic reform at home, President Johnson continued to try to adhere to a “middle” course. On 26 February, he authorized the deployment of elements of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade to Da Nang in northern South Vietnam to protect important air and naval facilities located there. These elements landed at Da Nang on 8 March. The U.S. Army’s 716th Military Police Battalion arrived two weeks later to assume security responsibilities for important U.S. military installations in and around Saigon. The need for heightened security at U.S. facilities proved prescient, for at the end of the month, a truck loaded with hundreds of pounds of plastic explosives detonated outside the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, damaging the building, killing two Americans and eleven South Vietnamese, and wounding several others, including the U.S. deputy ambassador, U. Alexis Johnson. In response, President Johnson approved the deployment of two more Marine battalions and as many as 20,000 logistical personnel to Vietnam on 1 April. He also authorized U.S. forces to carry out limited patrols near military installations to protect them from enemy mortar attacks and sapper raids. Some, notably Ambassador Taylor, wanted to confine the marines and any additional forces that might be sent to the mission of defending politically and logistically important coastal enclaves to minimize the chance of the United States becoming sucked into a major ground war. Others, including General Westmoreland and Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson, argued that such a posture was untenable and that offensive operations offered the only way to reach a favorable outcome.

The president, vacillating between the hope of avoiding war on the one hand and saving South Vietnam on the other, authorized U.S. ground forces to adopt a more aggressive posture on 6 April, but then made known that nothing should change for the immediate present. A week later, he vacillated again. After telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he was willing to do whatever was needed “to win the game in South Vietnam” and to “start killing more Viet Cong,” he recoiled when the Joint Chiefs recommended that he send in three U.S. Army divisions, opting instead to deploy just one brigade—the Army’s 173d Airborne Brigade—which Westmoreland had requested for security duties similar to those performed by the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade at Da Nang.

The airborne brigade arrived in South Vietnam on 5 May with two battalions of infantry and one of artillery. Offloading at the port of Vung Tau, southwest of Saigon, the brigade detached one battalion to protect the port and its airfield. The remainder of the 173d traveled north to the air base at Bien Hoa, twenty kilometers northeast of Saigon, the scene of a devastating Viet Cong raid against U.S. aircraft in November 1964. By the end of May, more than 50,000 U.S. personnel were present in Vietnam, almost half of them Army (*Map 4*).

Confined as they were to protecting a few key installations, the first U.S. ground combat units in Vietnam were unable to influence the course of the war. During the spring of 1965, the Communists pressed forward with their planned offensive, capturing one district capital and destroying the equivalent of one South Vietnamese battalion every week. In May, a large Viet Cong force nearly overran the provincial capital of Song Be, ninety kilometers north of Saigon. Later that month, the government sustained a major blow at the battle of Ba Gia in the northern province of Quang Ngai. Two Viet Cong regiments decimated the South Vietnamese 39th Ranger Battalion and a battalion from the South Vietnamese 51st Infantry Regiment. Then on 9 June, a Viet Cong regiment attacked the U.S. Army Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai, about 120 kilometers north of Saigon near the Cambodian border. During the fourteen-hour battle, 2d Lt. Charles Q. Williams, the executive officer of a detachment of the 5th Special Forces Group, led a successful defense of the camp despite repeated attacks from a larger force. At substantial personal risk, he ensured the evacuation of all personnel from the camp while sustaining four wounds himself. For his actions, Williams received



Map 4

the Medal of Honor. Still, the allies suffered significant losses: two battalions of relieving South Vietnamese troops, including one airborne battalion, were essentially destroyed in the battle. More than 400 South Vietnamese soldiers died before the Viet Cong forces broke contact and withdrew. The pattern of enemy success was becoming distressingly familiar.

Determined to press their advantage, North Vietnamese leaders continued to push troops and supplies into the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail—actually a network of trails running from North Vietnam along the borders of Laos and Cambodia and into South Vietnam. As the enemy's strength increased, the South Vietnamese sustained more and more casualties, which triggered an even higher rate of desertion. These events, coupled with complex maneuvering on behalf of South Vietnam's various political factions, forced Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat to hand the reins of government over to the Armed Forces Council. General Nguyen Van Thieu became chief of state with Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky installed as prime minister. The regime change would eventually bring a measure of stability to South Vietnam after a long period of debilitating political turmoil. The Johnson administration pledged its total support to the new regime, yet the military situation remained precarious. When the air campaign failed to deter North Vietnam, President Johnson informed Secretary of Defense McNamara that the United States needed to "find more dramatic and effective action in South Vietnam."

THE START OF OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS

Westmoreland responded aggressively to the president's concerns. In a message to Washington in early June that, in the words of Secretary McNamara, "stirred up a veritable hornet's nest," the MACV commander argued that U.S. combat units should take the war to enemy main force units to buy breathing space for the South Vietnamese Army. Ambassador Taylor, recognizing that North Vietnam would not crumble under the air campaign and that his enclave strategy was no longer viable, seconded Westmoreland's view. So too did Secretary McNamara, who told the president that the United States "could no longer postpone a choice about which path to take."

On 26 June, the president gave General Westmoreland the authority to use U.S. combat forces "in any situation in which the use of such troops is requested by an appropriate GVN [Government of Vietnam] commander and when, in COMUSMACV's [Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] judgment, their use is necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces." As one historian has noted, the administration had essentially granted Westmoreland unfettered discretion to

conduct offensive operations in South Vietnam whenever and wherever he deemed necessary.

Using his new authority, General Westmoreland on 28 June ordered the 173d Airborne Brigade to conduct an offensive sweep into War Zone D north of Saigon, a major enemy base that one reporter described as an “unbelievable tangle of double-canopy forest and thick undergrowth.” Several intense engagements followed in which the American troops killed a substantial number of enemy and uncovered large Viet Cong installations in the jungle.

Meanwhile, an accelerated buildup of U.S. forces was occurring. In mid-July, the 2d Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division arrived in Vietnam and moved into the Bien Hoa air base area. At the end of the month, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, deployed to Cam Ranh Bay, a large natural harbor some 300 kilometers northeast of Saigon. Work on major logistical bases began as well, particularly upgrading the port facilities at Saigon and developing Cam Ranh Bay into an extensive deepwater port to relieve the congestion at Saigon. Other projects included building additional airfields for light aircraft and jets, and supply facilities in several locations.

That same month, Secretary McNamara asked the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army General Earle G. Wheeler, what chance “the U.S. can have of winning in South Vietnam if we do everything we can.” A joint study group provided an appraisal on 14 July. The group stated that “within the bounds of reasonable assumptions . . . there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will—and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations.” In practical terms, this meant abandoning the administration’s incremental approach of gradual escalation and the calculated, but limited, application of force to persuade, rather than defeat, the enemy. Johnson would have to remove the restrictions he had imposed on the air campaign over North Vietnam, end the piecemeal and reactive deployment of forces, and lift the ban on offensive ground operations against the enemy’s supply and staging areas in Laos and Cambodia. Even then, success would not be guaranteed. The enemy might escalate his own efforts, and the budding stability in the Saigon government might evaporate—developments the United States could not control. McNamara did not forward the study to the White House.

After meeting with General Westmoreland in Saigon along with Henry Cabot Lodge, whom President Johnson had nominated to replace Ambassador Taylor, McNamara informed President Johnson that U.S. forces in South Vietnam should be increased to approximately 175,000 and that possibly another 100,000 would be required in early 1966. Even more men might be needed depending on developments. These additional troops would allow Westmoreland, who was currently in a primarily defensive and reactive mode, to take the offensive in the first half of 1966, concentrating on high-priority areas, destroying enemy forces, and allowing for the reinstatement of government control in the countryside through pacification measures. The secretary also recommended that the president mobilize 230,000 reservists and national guardsmen, a measure the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed vital if the health and readiness of the Army as a whole was to be maintained during the crisis.

President Johnson once again tried to balance his conflicting Cold War and domestic policy agendas. By the end of July, he had agreed to send everything Westmoreland had requested for 1965. Thirty-four more U.S. combat battalions—including the newly formed 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the first heliborne division in history—would be heading for Vietnam along with ten battalions belonging to America's Asian allies. He promised to consider, but did not commit to, sending additional forces in 1966. Monthly draft calls would be doubled to 35,000, but there would be no call-up of the reserves. Mobilizing the reserves would put the United States on a war footing, a politically controversial move that would incite a disruptive debate and possibly derail his attempt to push through Congress his "Great Society" agenda—a slate of legislation designed to attack poverty and racial prejudice. Lifting the ban on ground operations in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was also out of the question, as it would only lead to a wider conflict.

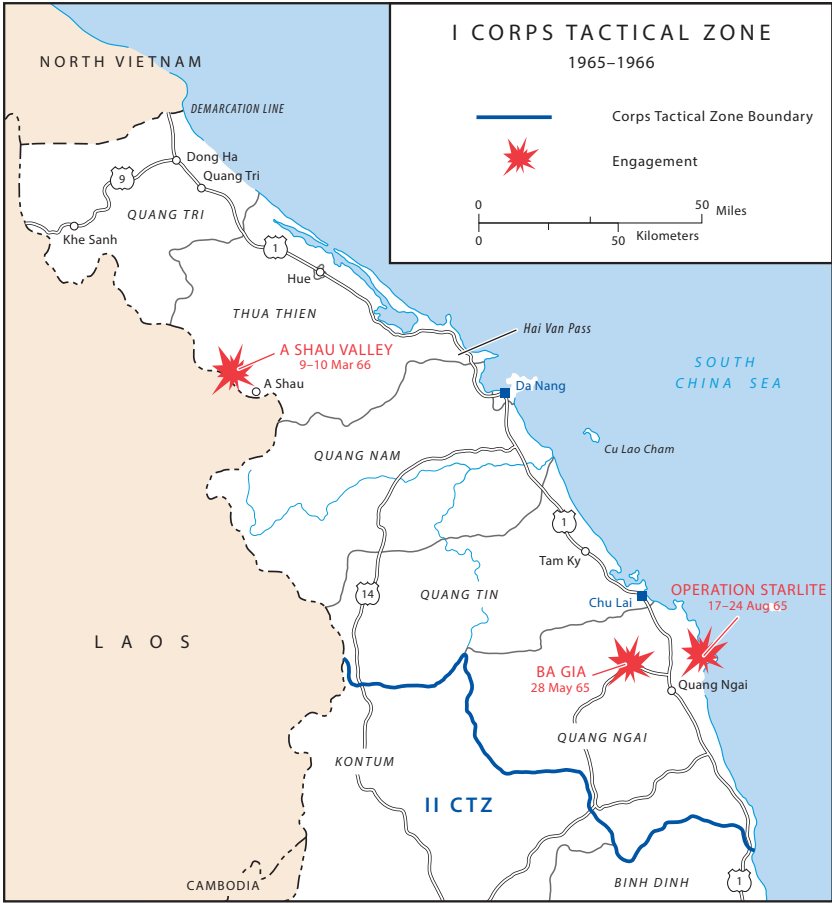
As the parameters under which he would have to operate became increasingly clear, Westmoreland moved to formulate a strategy to meet the situation. By September, he had articulated a concept consisting of three broad phases. The first task was to arrest the current Viet Cong offensive—"to stem the tide," as he put it. In this phase, the allies would defend existing enclaves, keep the enemy off balance with occasional forays, and improve pacification efforts in and around Saigon. Once the situation had been

stabilized and more reinforcements had arrived, a process that the general foresaw taking all of 1965 and 1966, Westmoreland planned to launch large-scale operations to destroy major enemy units and bases in 1967. Protected by the American shield, the South Vietnamese would meanwhile be able to clear and pacify designated high-priority areas, thereby further strengthening the Saigon government and weakening the enemy. Full restoration of government control throughout the countryside, the progressive withdrawal of U.S. forces, and the solidification of nation-building gains would occur in the third and final phase. For the most part, U.S. forces would bear the primary burden for major offensive operations, while the South Vietnamese concentrated on pacification and local security missions. Westmoreland forecast that the entire process would take years to complete.

FIRST BLOOD

As the MACV commander prepared to implement his strategic vision, the first large battle involving major U.S. ground combat units occurred in August when the III Marine Amphibious Force discovered a Viet Cong regiment on Quang Ngai Province's Batangan Peninsula just south of the Marine base at Chu Lai, and launched a preemptive attack called Operation STARLITE. The engagement began with an artillery and air bombardment before marines surrounded the Viet Cong unit and pinned it against the sea. Intense and bitter fighting, including hand-to-hand combat, lasted for several days before the marines would declare victory, killing almost 700 of the enemy while suffering 45 dead and 120 wounded (*Map 5*).

As satisfying as Westmoreland found Operation STARLITE, the Viet Cong made a statement of their own when they simultaneously overran the U.S. Special Forces camp at Dak Sut in Kontum Province. Only a few South Vietnamese troops and U.S. Army advisers stationed at the remote outpost were able to escape. The reversal highlighted not just the vulnerability of these small and isolated outposts, but also the role that the Central Highlands played in enemy strategy. Communist strategists had long considered the decisive theater of the war to be the highlands, where the terrain would offset the allies' technological supremacy and where Communist troops could thus isolate and defeat large allied formations. After achieving such victories, the enemy would then be posed to advance down the



Map 5

mountain spurs and valleys to the coast where they could cut South Vietnam into one or more disjointed parts, ripe for the picking.

Determined to forestall this danger, in September Westmoreland chose to introduce a new and versatile weapon to the battle for control of the Central Highlands—the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). Wanting to reduce reaction time and fuel consumption, the MACV commander chose to deploy the division not on the coast, but at a forward base at An Khe in western Binh Dinh Province. Located about sixty-five kilometers from the major U.S. logistics port of Qui Nhon, An Khe



A U.S. Army artillery fire support base in the Central Highlands

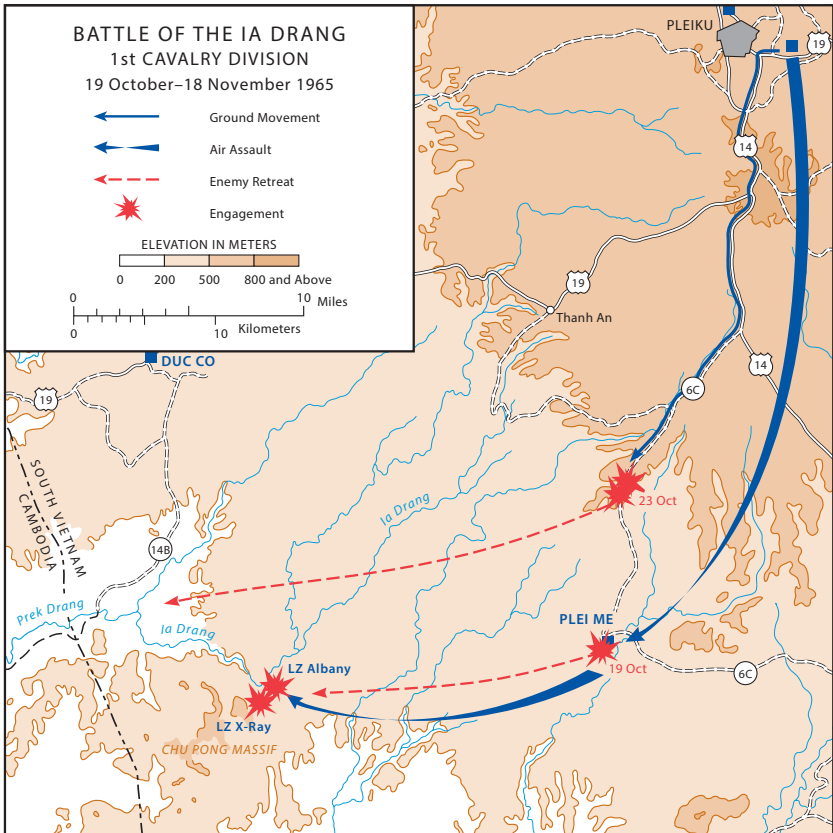
was situated on Highway 19 approximately halfway between Qui Nhon and the vital road and political center of Pleiku City, the capital of Pleiku Province. To facilitate the move, the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division and South Vietnamese forces cleared the An Khe area and secured Highway 19 between Qui Nhon and An Khe, flushing the enemy from the area and inflicting substantial casualties. This five-day operation, known as GIBRALTAR, was one of the first extensive U.S. Army search-and-destroy campaigns of the war. The brigade claimed that it killed 225 Viet Cong, while its own losses numbered 13 killed and 28 wounded. As the 1st Cavalry Division's more than 400 helicopters moved up to An Khe under GIBRALTAR's protection, Westmoreland made ready to test whether the massive use of helicopters would give the United States the advantage it needed to root out the elusive enemy from his mountain fortress.

THE 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION GOES INTO ACTION

It did not take long for Westmoreland's concern about the Central Highlands, and his proposed remedy, to be put to the test. In October, the enemy assembled three North Vietnamese PAVN regiments—the 32d, the 33d, and the 66th—in western Pleiku Province and in adjacent Cambodia. North Vietnamese General Chu Huy Man's *Western Highlands Field Front* had designed a

plan to strike western plateau areas of Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and Phu Bon Provinces. The first phase of the plan was to destroy the Special Forces camps at Plei Me, Dak Sut, and Duc Co and to obliterate the Le Thanh District headquarters, which defended the approaches to Pleiku City.

On 19 October, General Man began his campaign when the 33d PAVN Regiment attacked the Special Forces camp at Plei Me, forty kilometers southwest of Pleiku City. The South Vietnamese corps commander, Lt. Gen. Vinh Loc, dispatched a relief force from his headquarters at Pleiku City. Assisted by U.S. tactical air strikes and the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, the South Vietnamese ground troops soon reached Plei Me. Disoriented by the speed and unpredictability of the U.S. airmobile assaults, and





A UH-1 Huey gunship idles on an airfield next to an A-1 Skyraider attack aircraft.

hounded by the 1st Cavalry Division's helicopter gunships, the North Vietnamese beat a hasty retreat west toward Cambodia. All told, the Communist regiment lost around 800 killed, 100 missing, and 500 wounded from its original complement of 2,200 men (*Map 6*).

Seeking to build on this success, a week later General Westmoreland directed the 1st Cavalry Division to seek out and destroy the enemy in western Pleiku Province in Operation SILVER BAYONET. Taking over from the 1st Brigade on 9 November, the 1st Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade went looking for the enemy near the Cambodian border, hoping to box in the *33d PAVN Regiment* before it could slip away. The brigade, commanded by Col. Timothy W. Brown, consisted of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 7th Cavalry, and for this operation, the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry. On 13 November, division commander Maj. Gen. Harry W. O. Kinnard directed Brown to search the densely wooded area south of the Ia Drang River at the base of the Chu Pong Massif, a rugged mountain area spanning the South Vietnam-Cambodia border, one that U.S. intelligence believed to be a major base for the North Vietnamese. The intelligence proved correct.

After the reversals in October, General Man had reconstituted the remnants of the *33d PAVN Regiment* into a battalion and placed it in the valley between the Ia Drang River and Hill 542, a

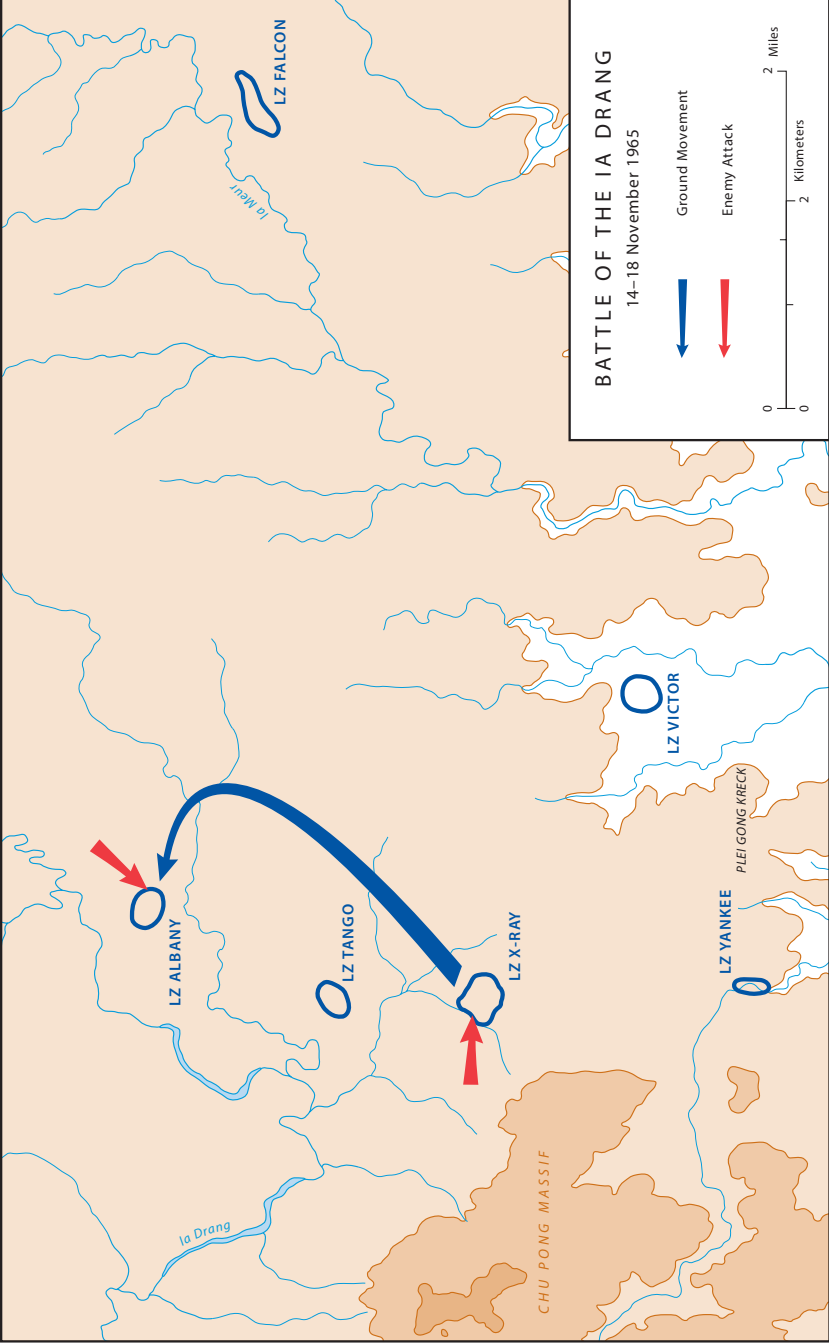
prominent point of the Chu Pong Massif. The North Vietnamese commander situated the *32d PAVN Regiment*, which had suffered moderate losses over the last few weeks, about thirteen kilometers to the west. His freshest unit, the *66th PAVN Regiment*, waited along the Ia Drang River roughly two kilometers west of the *33d PAVN Regiment*. The entire *1st PAVN Division* was now concentrated in a relatively compact area on ground of its choosing.

On the evening of 13 November, Colonel Brown ordered the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, commanded by Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore, to execute an assault by helicopter into the Ia Drang Valley, just north of the Chu Pong Massif, early the next morning. Two batteries of 105-mm. howitzers would support Moore's battalion from Landing Zone FALCON, a clearing about nine kilometers east of the search area.

Moore decided he would insert his battalion as a unit instead of setting down his four companies into separate landing zones. Thus, his complete force would be available to him in case the enemy attacked upon landing. However, Moore's battalion was only at two-thirds strength because of losses from malaria, individuals completing their service obligation, and other duties.

The morning of 14 November dawned bright and clear. A reconnaissance of the area identified a large natural clearing in the jungle that was suitable as a landing zone, which Moore designated Landing Zone X-RAY. The two artillery batteries to provide fire support were in position. It was approximately 0915. All preparations were complete; there were no signs of enemy activity around the landing zone. Moore ordered the initial assault for 1030. He was also aware, based on recent intelligence, that an enemy battalion was located five kilometers northwest of X-RAY, with another enemy force of undetermined size likely southwest of the clearing, and a base camp about three kilometers to the northwest. These were the forces Moore's battalion would attack (*Map 7*).

Concerned that the earlier aerial reconnaissance had alerted the enemy to his plan, Moore arranged for the 21st Artillery to fire an eight-minute diversionary bombardment on two alternate landing zones, TANGO and YANKEE, located two kilometers to the north and south of X-RAY, respectively. This was followed by a twenty-minute stream of fire on X-RAY. Gunships of the 2d Battalion, 20th Artillery (Aerial Rocket) (Airmobile) then launched thirty seconds of rocket and machine gun fire, followed by more machine gun fire from the escort gunships of the 229th Combat Aviation Battalion. Moore, in the lead helicopter of the assault, watched



Map 7



Members of the 1st Cavalry Division guard captured Viet Cong prisoners.

his plan unfold without problem. The fires concentrated around X-RAY were delivered precisely where needed, and perfectly timed for the assault. At 1048, Colonel Moore and the first elements of Company B leapt from the eight helicopters to secure the landing zone. The troopers charged into the sparse scrub brush and trees surrounding X-RAY, firing volleys at potential enemy positions. The helicopters on the ground lifted off, and soon after the second wave of eight helicopters descended. The shuttling of the battalion into the area of operations would continue into the afternoon.

As the lead element secured the landing zone, Company B reported it had captured a lone North Vietnamese soldier. Under interrogation the prisoner revealed that three Communist battalions with a combined strength of around 1,600 soldiers were located near the base of the mountain. At that moment, Moore barely had a company on the ground. Less than an hour later, Company B made contact with a large North Vietnamese force northwest of the landing zone. The contact grew in intensity until about 1330 when the Company B commander reported that two enemy companies were attempting to outflank his position. Second Lt. Henry Herrick of Company B maneuvered his second platoon to block the enemy advance, but soon discovered that his men had lost contact with the remainder of the company and they were now surrounded by North Vietnamese troops.

Around that time, a third helicopter lift arrived at X-RAY, giving Colonel Moore an additional cavalry company to reinforce the two already in contact. The new troops arrived just in time; North Vietnamese scouts had begun to infiltrate the landing zone, moving stealthily through the tall elephant grass, and firing on the Huey helicopters as they landed and departed. Moore used his third company to restore the perimeter, while he directed his air operations and artillery liaison officers to ring X-RAY with a curtain of steel.

For the next five hours, the pair of batteries from the 21st Artillery provided nearly continuous support from Landing Zone FALCON. Unfortunately, the forward observers on the ground and the artillery liaison and forward air controller in the command helicopter overhead had difficulty controlling the bombardment. Smoke, dust, and vegetation obscured the impact areas, so the forward observers began walking artillery barrages into places that would help the besieged companies. Although the artillery fire did not halt the North Vietnamese assault, it did hinder the flow of enemy reinforcements into the battle. Two air strikes also relieved pressure on the U.S. units.

As the battle raged and casualties mounted in the afternoon, Herrick's surrounded platoon struggled to survive. Sgt. Ernie Savage was in command since Herrick and the platoon sergeant had been killed in the intense fighting. Savage called in artillery fire as close as he could to the perimeter. All through the day and into the night the artillery kept enemy forces at bay as they attacked the position persistently. In the early afternoon, Companies A and B tried to reach the platoon, but they were stopped by a sizable enemy force. They tried again around 1620. At that time, one of the Company A platoons ran directly into a larger enemy force, and it was soon pinned down. The use of white phosphorus artillery shells allowed other elements of Company A to reach the platoon, which pulled back with its dead and wounded.

Moore estimated that his battalion was fighting approximately 500–600 enemy soldiers. He asked his brigade commander to send another rifle company, which Brown approved. At 1500, Moore landed the remainder of the tactical elements of the battalion consisting of the reconnaissance platoon, three helicopter loads of Company C soldiers, and some Company D personnel. The battalion surgeon and his staff arrived and began

to treat the wounded, identifying which among them required immediate airlift to a rear hospital. Throughout the afternoon, helicopters delivered water, ammunition, rations, and medical supplies, and the battalion's operations officer, the artillery liaison officer, and the forward air controller joined Colonel Moore on the ground. The promised reinforcements also arrived by helicopter in the form of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry. Moore made the unit his reserve. Finally, at 1740, he decided to pull all his units into a tight defensive perimeter for the night, and while the "lost" platoon remained separated, he had communications with it. The troops prepared the clearing for night landings and the supporting gunners registered their mortars and howitzers. In a pensive moment, Moore wrote in his postwar memoir *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young* that dust and smoke "hung like a horizontal curtain" over the landing zone as darkness descended.

Few slept well that night. The enemy had conducted a couple of small probing actions of the main perimeter. Meanwhile, the isolated platoon, about 300 meters to the north, had withstood enemy assaults with a combination of grit, small-arms and artillery fire, and U.S. Air Force tactical bombing strikes, which relied on air-dropped flares to see the enemy. At dawn, Moore and his staff prepared to rescue the endangered platoon, but the enemy

A medical evacuation helicopter transports the wounded from the battlefield.





Soldiers of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, prepare an 81-mm. mortar for action in Phu Yen Province during OPERATION HARRISON.

forestalled the attempt when a battalion from the *66th PAVN Regiment* attacked the southern sector of the main perimeter. The Americans called in artillery and mortar fire as well as air strikes to blunt the Communist assault. The fire came in so close that the defenders could hear the shrapnel scything through the vegetation around them, but the enemy attack continued. Moore called for more reinforcements, and again Brown assured him of the same.

By 1000 on the fifteenth, Colonel Moore had repulsed the attack and had begun receiving reinforcements from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, on the eastern edge of the landing zone. Colonel Brown also established a second artillery landing zone five kilometers northwest of X-RAY where he placed two more batteries of 105-mm. howitzers. A few hours later, Lt. Col. Robert B. Tully and his 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arrived at X-Ray after completing a 3.5-kilometer march from Landing Zone VICTOR. The battalion commanders formed a relief column, and by mid-afternoon, the survivors of Herrick's "lost" platoon were safely inside the U.S. perimeter. Everyone dug in for the night.

The North Vietnamese attacked the U.S. position with a sizable force several times in the early hours of 16 November, but again, artillery and mortar fires as well as tactical air support repelled the enemy. By 1000 on the sixteenth, the siege of X-RAY had ended. A



The CH-47 Chinook helicopters deliver troops and 105-mm. howitzers at a landing zone on the Bong Son Plain during OPERATION MASHER.

short time later, the lead element of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, under the command of Lt. Col. Robert A. McDade, marched into Colonel Moore's perimeter. With its arrival, helicopters lifted the men of the 1st Battalion and the other units that had fought beside them for three days out of X-RAY to rest and reorganize at a camp just outside Pleiku City. But the Ia Drang campaign was not over.

On the morning of 17 November, Tully's 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and McDade's 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, marched out of X-RAY with Tully's battalion in the lead. McDade's destination was to the north, an open area known as Landing Zone ALBANY, while Tully moved to another landing zone to the northeast. McDade's unit included a company from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, as a replacement for the two companies that had been airlifted out with Moore's battalion. A walking artillery barrage covered Tully's battalion.

At 1100, the two battalions went their separate directions with Tully offering McDade his supporting fires, but McDade declined the gesture, fearful that the fires would betray his unit's position to the enemy. McDade, a new battalion commander, also did not require his subordinate units to assume tactical formations as they marched to ALBANY, although some of his company commanders did so as they moved through the tall grass in the rising heat of the day. So slack was the security in some units that one company

commander called the march a “walk in the sun.” At noon, a company took two North Vietnamese prisoners who had deserted, but learned nothing of importance under interrogation. The unit pressed on after a short rest and the head of McDade’s strung-out column reached ALBANY a little after 1300. The landing zone was sizable, with two open fields suitable for landing helicopters, and the men of the lead platoon dispersed to secure the area, “sitting on their packs,” as they awaited orders.

Unknown to McDade, a battalion from the *66th PAVN Regiment* and a company from the *33d PAVN Regiment* were waiting for him. The North Vietnamese commander in charge, Le Xuan Phoi, had deployed his troops to create an L-shaped ambush at the edge of the clearing. His soldiers to the northeast of the landing zone formed the long stem of the L, running parallel to McDade’s line of advance, while the lone company formed the base of the L. The Communist troops held their fire until McDade’s lead elements entered the clearing and reached its far edge. At 1315, they opened fire on the unsuspecting Americans, mowing down dozens in the opening moments of the ambush.

As the firing intensified, Communist soldiers closed the distance with McDade’s men from all sides. The Americans soon became disoriented in the chaos. North Vietnamese soldiers were all around them, and the tall grass made it hard to see what was occurring and to consolidate into a defensive position. Platoons and companies shattered into ineffectiveness under the intense fire, with some U.S. soldiers firing on their comrades in the confusion. The fighting, in some locations, turned into a hand-to-hand struggle.

The afternoon stretched into evening, but even in the fading light, the U.S. artillery continued to support what had now become three islands of American survivors. Finally, at dawn of the eighteenth, the shelling ceased, but small-arms fire between the North Vietnamese and the Americans continued through the morning. In the early afternoon, McDade’s staff officers called for close air support before the North Vietnamese made an all-out assault. A-1E Skyraiders from Pleiku City answered the call and at 1415 began their attack. Below them, the A-1E pilots could see an enemy force concentrating to the east of ALBANY. The propeller-driven fighter-bombers strafed and dropped napalm. For two hours, the planes kept up their strikes, which allowed the Americans on the perimeter to organize and consolidate. Sniping, probing actions, and

small firefights would continue into the early evening. Eventually they ceased, and a company from Pleiku arrived by helicopter to reinforce what remained of McDade's battalion. The airlift also meant that wounded could be evacuated.

Meanwhile, a company from the 5th Cavalry, which had begun its movement that afternoon, was making its way from the east toward McDade's location. It joined up with the company of McDade's battalion that was the farthest down in the column, and which had been able to mount a strong defense as an integrated unit. These two companies then moved forward to link up with McDade, but the approaching darkness and heavy enemy fire required them to wait until morning. In the darkness, the enemy withdrew. While the enemy would order another foray at another location in the valley later that day, it would be the last North Vietnamese assault of any consequence during the Pleiku campaign, and the American units countered it effectively.

That next day, 19 November, the Americans recovered casualties and equipment and tallied up the enemy dead. As the official history indicates, it had been "a terrible bloodletting." Approximately 70 percent of the men in the U.S. units that had been ambushed were either killed or wounded; one company had lost three-fourths of its men. The final tally: 151 killed, 121 wounded, and 5 missing. The 1st Cavalry Division's after action report estimated that enemy losses were in the hundreds, but this was a matter of conjecture. Nonetheless, enemy casualties were probably substantial and included the death of Le Xuan Phoi.

The heroic stand of Colonel Moore's battalion and the earlier successful engagement at Plei Me suggested that even inexperienced U.S. soldiers could defeat North Vietnamese regulars under difficult circumstances. In the view of General Westmoreland, the outcome was an "unprecedented victory" that produced a discernible improvement in the morale of the South Vietnamese government. General Kinnard also considered the Pleiku campaign a success. It had validated the airmobile concept and blunted the North Vietnamese campaign to dominate the highlands. The near destruction of three North Vietnamese regiments was also a credit. On the other hand, at Landing Zone ALBANY, there had also been "failures of leadership, particularly at the battalion level." Moreover, in many instances U.S. ground troops would not have survived without massive air and artillery support. This led to a debate about the airmobile division's "staying power" since it did

not have the heavy equipment that a standard infantry division had. More significantly, the engagement hammered home to commanders the importance of having access to heavy fire support at all times.

A FLURRY OF ENGAGEMENTS

As the Ia Drang campaign was unfolding, other offensive actions were occurring to the south. The 1st Infantry Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade, and South Vietnamese units pressed outward from Saigon into the enemy's sanctuaries near the capital. For three months, from October to December 1965, the 173d Airborne Brigade carried out fourteen company-size or larger operations east and northeast of Saigon. The 1st Infantry Division, operating mainly north of Saigon, executed fifty battalion-size or larger operations with names like HOPSCOTCH, VIPER, MAVERICK, and SMASH. Both of the units also informed MACV that they conducted more than 3,000 smaller operations, of which approximately 800 resulted in engagements with the enemy. These figures attest to the enemy's willingness to enter combat with U.S. forces. The maxim for their campaign was straightforward, "Seek out the Americans to fight them, pursue the [South Vietnamese] puppets to kill them."

November 1965 proved to be a month of success and failure for the South Vietnamese. One South Vietnamese regiment inflicted a heavy defeat on a Viet Cong main force regiment operating near the Michelin rubber plantation seventy kilometers northwest of Saigon. However, the thrill of this success abated five days later when a Viet Cong regiment overran a battalion of government troops, rendering the unit ineffective. Intelligence reports indicated a substantial increase in the number of PAVN units infiltrating from North Vietnam. Specifically, U.S. intelligence estimated that the number of North Vietnamese regiments had increased from five to twelve, with an estimated strength of 65,000 combat personnel. By year's end, nearly a third of all Communist battalions in South Vietnam were composed of North Vietnamese regulars.

U.S. forces saw action too, and the results were generally positive. After Operation HUMP in early November, the commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade said that his unit had "beat the living hell" out of the enemy units that had crossed its path. During Operation BUSHMASTER II, which ran from 28



Soldiers on reconnaissance make their way through a rubber tree plantation in III Corps.

November through 1 December 1965, the 1st Infantry Division mauled several Viet Cong units and destroyed a large quantity of enemy supplies. This second operation proved once again the value of supporting firepower, whether it was Air Force fighters, helicopter gunships, or artillery. In fact, one of the U.S. battalion commanders involved with BUSHMASTER II remarked that he had such an abundance of firepower he had to take care not to make casualties of his own men through friendly fire.

By late November 1965, North Vietnam had more infantry battalions in South Vietnam than the United States, and Westmoreland realized that the Communists could build up their forces faster than the United States. It appeared that the enemy was putting the bulk of his forces in the Central Highlands. Westmoreland also believed that projecting U.S. forces into the Mekong Delta was necessary to strengthen allied control of this vital rice-producing area and to interdict the main infiltration routes from Cambodia into the Communist base area known as War Zone C, a triple-canopy rainforest that covered northern Tay Ninh Province. His assessment was not optimistic. To be able to take to the offensive in a sustained way, U.S. combat deployments needed to be larger, as he could only cover so much territory with the forces at hand. Further, because of the currently limited logistical infrastructure, especially port facilities, additional support units were necessary. An

intelligence estimate that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) completed four months earlier suggested that Westmoreland's concerns were valid.

Even more disturbing from a combat effectiveness perspective, Westmoreland and the MACV staff came to realize in late summer that in preparing the troop estimates for the Phase I reinforcement plan, they had drastically miscalculated the number of support personnel needed to sustain the forty-four maneuver battalions effectively. Thus, throughout the autumn, based on a flurry of MACV requests that President Johnson readily approved, air transport, air defense, artillery, engineer, medical, tactical air units, and other support elements were added, enlarging the target Phase I force level to 220,000 U.S. troops. Stretching out deployments under this phase until April 1966—an action necessitated by the president's refusal to mobilize the reserves—caused an overlap with the Phase II troop movements, which complicated Phase II deployment planning.

After visiting Vietnam in November, Secretary of Defense McNamara warned President Johnson that U.S. casualty rates of possibly 1,000 dead per month could be expected. He voiced his belief that the North Vietnamese thought the war would be a long one with time being on their side and they would have the better staying power. The most distressing note was the secretary's insistence that even the original estimates for Phase II troop requirements were inadequate, providing only sufficient force to hold present positions. In addition to several units of Free World Military Assistance Forces (mainly from Australia and South Korea), McNamara recommended forty additional combat battalions to "provide what it takes in men and materiel . . . to stick with our stated objectives and win the war." The toll to be paid was pricey—approximately 400,000 U.S. personnel in Vietnam by the end of 1966, with an additional 200,000 in 1967. Even then, McNamara could not guarantee success. Perhaps he recognized the situation was exactly how the Prussian theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, described it in his major work, *On War*, "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."

Although Westmoreland of necessity focused much of his attention on the arrival of combat units, the earlier U.S. advisory effort continued as well. It took a slightly new direction in 1965 as the MACV commander focused much of its new growth at the district level, with 151 of South Vietnam's 241 districts receiving

U.S. advisory teams. Those advisory teams brought much-needed training and resources to the Regional and Popular Forces who did much of the fighting against Viet Cong local force and guerrilla units. The province and district advisers also brought increased assistance to South Vietnam's efforts to pacify the countryside. All told, approximately 5,000 U.S. Army officers and enlisted men acted as advisers to South Vietnamese units and to provincial and district headquarters around the country. In addition, some 1,500 members of the U.S. Army's 5th Special Forces Group advised the 30,000-man-strong Civilian Irregular Defense Group.

In December 1965, both sides agreed to a thirty-hour Christmas truce, and President Johnson approved a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam for thirty-seven days while the United States attempted to pressure the North Vietnamese into a negotiated peace settlement. When the cease-fire ended, U.S. and allied units retained their defensive posture as MACV ordered them not to fire unless fired upon or attacked. Nonetheless, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacks grew in number and strength, and on 26 December U.S. forces and their allies resumed ground offensive operations. By year's end, U.S. troop levels in Vietnam reached more than 184,000, and *Time* magazine selected General Westmoreland as its Man of the Year for 1965. Overall, as a CIA historian noted, the increased U.S. military presence had precluded North Vietnam from toppling the feeble Saigon government. However, it was too early to tell whether President Johnson's gamble would shift the military initiative in the allies' favor.

YEAR OF THE HORSE: 1966

With North Vietnam showing no interest in peace negotiations, Westmoreland took an equally uncompromising stance as the new year began. He ordered his subordinates to crush the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese units throughout South Vietnam. The mission was straightforward: "find, fix, and destroy." Unfortunately, U.S. forces were still too small in number to seize the initiative effectively. Consequently, allied forces would continue to focus on keeping roads open, securing rice harvests, and making spoiling attacks to keep the enemy off balance until the allied buildup would allow the United States to undertake large-scale operations on a sustained basis.

At the beginning of January 1966, the 173d Airborne Brigade moved into Hau Nghia Province to the west of Saigon, a region

that contained several major Viet Cong infiltration routes and a string of forested enemy base camps. From 1 to 8 January, the paratroopers swept the rubber and pineapple plantations along the Oriental River during Operation MARAUDER, finding numerous camps, caches, and arms factories. The paratroopers then shifted northeast to the Ho Bo Woods, a disused rubber plantation on the Saigon River near the town of Cu Chi, and close to where the 25th Infantry Division would soon establish its main base camp. Pairing up with the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, for Operation CRIMP, the 173d Airborne Brigade soon discovered an extensive tunnel and bunker system, some of it more than a dozen meters below ground, that contained command bunkers, a hospital, classrooms, living quarters, kitchens, and defensive positions. The allied soldiers met stiff Viet Cong resistance as they searched and destroyed the tunnels, but were able to capture mortars, anti-aircraft machine guns, and a large number of documents valuable for their intelligence (*Map 8*).

The 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, began the new year with Operation MATADOR, to find and destroy the enemy in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces. As with Operations MARAUDER and CRIMP, the action underscored the depth of enemy infiltration in South Vietnam as well as the benefits the enemy derived

Troops of the advance element of the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, arrive at Ton Son Nhut Airport.





from sanctuaries in neighboring Cambodia. The troops uncovered abundant evidence of enemy activity, but the enemy was usually able to escape across the border. Unable to attack the cross-border sanctuaries due to restrictions imposed by President Johnson, Westmoreland continued to focus his efforts in wearing down enemy strength inside South Vietnam.

On 19 January 1966 in the coastal lowlands of II Corps, the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, along with the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade and the South Vietnamese 47th Regiment, initiated Operation VAN BUREN to locate and destroy a North Vietnamese regiment believed to be in the Tuy Hoa Valley, one of the principal rice-growing regions in Phu Yen Province. In addition to capturing and killing a number of the enemy, the allies secured the harvest of more than 30,000 tons of rice, which they placed in government warehouses. Westmoreland augmented allied forces in II Corps by directing the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, which had begun arriving in Vietnam in late 1965, to assemble near the strategic crossroads of Pleiku City.

In January 1966, President Johnson and Prime Minister Ky met in Hawaii to discuss the war. President Johnson renewed his pledge to defend South Vietnam, with the allies agreeing to pay increased attention to gaining the support of the South Vietnamese people for their government. Continuing in the vein set by Westmoreland's three-phased strategy, the president then set specific goals for 1966. Among these were to bring 60 percent

Marines from South Korea set up new fortifications near Tuy Hoa.



of South Vietnam's populace under government control, to destroy about half of the enemy's major base areas, and to wear down Communist forces "at a rate as high as their capability to put men into the field." The president and the secretary of defense also reassured General Westmoreland that he would receive all the Phase II reinforcements he asked for, albeit at a slower pace than the MACV commander had originally envisioned.

The enemy, of course, did not remain idle, with the situation in the northern provinces assuming a particularly ominous aspect. Two North Vietnamese divisions threatened invasion across the Demilitarized Zone into the northernmost province of Quang Tri. By February, enemy infiltration across the northern border as well as from Laos into the next province to the south, Thua Thien, was well under way. These two provinces, separated from the rest of the country by a precipitous mountain barrier that extended to the sea and could be traversed only by the narrow Hai Van Pass, had a single South Vietnamese division and a U.S. Marine battalion deployed to protect them. Responding to the looming threat, MACV sent the greater part of the U.S. 3d Marine Division north of the Hai Van Pass, leaving the U.S. 1st Marine Division and a South Vietnamese division to defend the three southern provinces of I Corps.

If U.S. forces were arriving more slowly than Westmoreland would have preferred, enough men were on the ground to warrant greater development in command and control arrangements. In March, the MACV commander formed two Corps-level subordinate headquarters. I Field Force controlled U.S. units in South Vietnam's II Corps region, while II Field Force controlled U.S. units operating in South Vietnam's III and IV Corps. A U.S. Marine Corps entity—III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF)—controlled U.S. units in South Vietnam's I Corps.

March got off to a rocky start for III MAF headquarters when North Vietnamese regiments attacked a Special Forces camp in the remote A Chau Valley of western Thua Thien Province. After three days of severe fighting in terrible weather, the CIDG soldiers and their associated U.S. and South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel abandoned the camp in the face of a superior force. The camp was key to the surveillance of the valley, and with its abandonment, North Vietnamese units moved in and built a major logistical base to store supplies brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Because the allies were short of troops and helicopters,

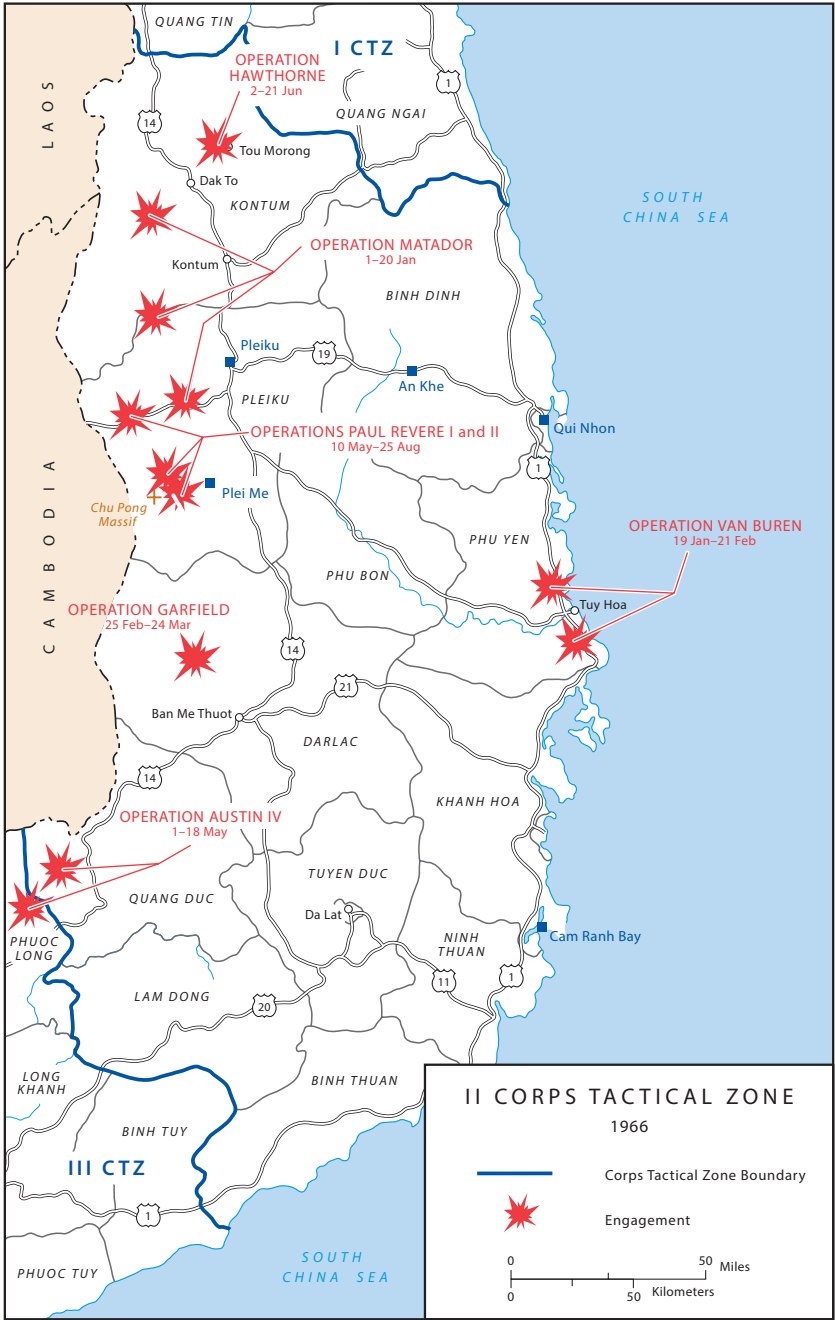
and threatened by the possibility of a North Vietnamese incursion across the Demilitarized Zone, Westmoreland reluctantly decided not to reoccupy the camp. It would be two years before U.S. troops would be in a position to return.

Meanwhile, a political crisis arose in I Corps when Buddhists and student factions in Hue and Da Nang challenged the South Vietnamese government's authority. Anti-government demonstrations soon spread to Saigon. The government attempted to quell the disorder by adopting a political program to meet Buddhist demands. Unrest continued in Saigon until June when South Vietnamese troops seized the principal Buddhist center in the capital, thereby crushing the Buddhists' power. Fortunately, the struggle between the Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government had little impact on U.S. military units.

In late March, still concerned with the safety of the Central Highlands, Westmoreland sent two battalions of the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, and some engineer units to repair and secure Highway 14 between Pleiku City and Ban Me Thuot. Once the road—which the Viet Cong had kept closed for nearly a year—had been opened, the cavalry troop and tank platoon attached to the 3d Brigade began running patrols between the two cities to discourage the enemy from building roadblocks or setting ambushes. When more U.S. units moved into the Central Highlands, General Westmoreland planned to restore the northern branch of Highway 14 between Pleiku City and Kontum City, thereby giving the allies a dependable north-south line of communications that stretched nearly 300 kilometers from the upper to the lower end of the Central Highlands (*Map 9*).

Farther south, the allied campaign to remove the enemy from the provinces surrounding Saigon met strong opposition in Hau Nghia Province, northwest of the capital. The enemy there posed a major threat to Saigon. Additionally, the province contained the major enemy supply routes between Cambodia, the Mekong Delta, and War Zones C and D. War Zone C, abutting the Cambodian border, was where the National Liberation Front supposedly had its headquarters. Between it and War Zone D lay the infamous Iron Triangle, a hilly, heavily forested area containing an extensive underground tunnel system, mines, and booby traps. Together, these Communist bastions posed a major threat to the capital.

General Westmoreland responded to the danger by deploying the bulk of the newly arrived U.S. 25th Infantry Division to



Map 9



A U.S. soldier examines the contents of a bunker abandoned by the Viet Cong.

Hau Nghia Province. The division established its base camp along Highway 1 at Cu Chi and began operations throughout the province. In addition, in March and early April, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Australian Task Force launched Operation ABILENE, a spoiling operation to destroy base camps and caches that the *5th PLAF Division* had established east of Saigon in preparation for an attack on the capital. Although no major engagements occurred, the allies seized supplies and forced the Viet Cong to abandon the area for the moment.

In late April, the 1st Infantry Division entered War Zone C in northern Tay Ninh Province. The sweep operation known as BIRMINGHAM uncovered vast quantities of rice, clothing, medicine, and other supplies that enemy rear service troops had smuggled across the border and then stashed in concealed dumps. The attack did not inflict large numbers of enemy casualties, as the Viet Cong opted for their usual tactic of withdrawing into Cambodia.

Almost simultaneously with BIRMINGHAM, the 101st Airborne Division launched Operation AUSTIN IV in the II Corps border provinces of Quang Duc and Phuoc Long, a foray that lasted until mid-May. The action began with the division's 1st Brigade routing a battalion from the *141st PAVN Regiment*, forcing it to retreat into Cambodia for sanctuary. Two weeks later, on 1 June, the same U.S. brigade, accompanied by South Vietnamese

units began Operation HAWTHORNE, a spoiling attack designed to thwart an anticipated enemy offensive around Tou Morong, Tan Canh, and Dak To in Kontum Province. After nineteen days of tough fighting, the enemy lost more than 500 soldiers, rendering his *24th PAVN Regiment* combat ineffective. Operations along the border to thwart the enemy's monsoon season offensive soon spread to Darlac and Pleiku Provinces. There, in Operation PAUL REVERE, the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, and supporting units made contact with the *1st PAVN Division* in the border area west of Pleiku and killed more than 400 of the enemy while suffering light casualties itself.

While U.S. units preempted the enemy's planned offensive in II Corps, the 1st Infantry Division and the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division continued to hunt for enemy main force units in III Corps. The scene of the action was the corridor between War Zone C and Highway 13, an all-weather road that ran some 130 kilometers north from Saigon through Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces. The road was the main line of communications between the capital and allied installations in northern III Corps. When II Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Jonathan O. Seaman, learned in early June that the *9th PLAF Division* was planning to cut the road and perhaps attack the district capital of Loc Ninh in northern Binh Long Province, he ordered Maj. Gen. William E. DePuy and his 1st Infantry Division to begin a highway security mission known as Operation EL PASO II.

The first major contact of the operation took place on 8 June when the *272d Regiment* from the *9th PLAF Division* ambushed an armored cavalry troop from the 1st Infantry Division south of Loc Ninh. General DePuy reinforced his hard-pressed cavalymen with an infantry battalion inserted by helicopter into the enemy's rear. South Vietnamese forces also joined the battle. The combined allied force broke the ambush and killed an estimated 300 Viet Cong soldiers at a loss of fourteen Americans and nineteen South Vietnamese. Over the next five weeks, General DePuy's 1st Infantry Division fought several more major battles with the *9th PLAF Division* in the vicinity of Loc Ninh and An Loc, eliminating more than 2,000 enemy soldiers by the time that the operation ended on 13 July. U.S. losses were 125 killed and 424 wounded, but DePuy had proven that his division could defend the Highway 13 corridor with only modest assistance from the South Vietnamese and II Field Force's artillery and aviation assets. However, DePuy and Seaman

would need additional troops if they intended to pursue the enemy into the jungles of Binh Long and Binh Duong Provinces, where the Viet Cong had established their main base camps.

RENEWED EMPHASIS ON PACIFICATION

Notwithstanding the lopsided casualties that often resulted when U.S. and Communist troops clashed, Secretary McNamara gave the president an ambivalent report when he returned from visiting Saigon in July 1966. “We have done somewhat better militarily than I anticipated,” he told Johnson, saying that the buildup of U.S. forces had halted the Communist military initiative and lessened the probability that the Viet Cong could attain victory in South Vietnam. However, McNamara also highlighted two concerns. He forthrightly admitted that he could not see any “reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon” because enemy morale remained high despite the heavy losses inflicted by the allies. Further, the enemy continued to replace losses through recruitment in South Vietnam and infiltration from the North. The second issue was that pacification was a severe disappointment. Indications were that the Viet Cong political infrastructure was thriving, giving it a distinct advantage in intelligence gathering, and guerrilla operations in the countryside had become bolder and more successful. The South Vietnamese remained a weak ally, decidedly lacking in effectiveness and initiative.

To rectify this situation, McNamara recommended that the United States take a more active role in supporting South Vietnam’s pacification efforts and “getting ourselves into a military posture that we credibly would maintain indefinitely—a position that makes trying to ‘wait us out’ less attractive.” The secretary told the president that pacification—a term that encompassed the various military, economic, and political efforts undertaken by the Saigon government to promote security and prosperity in the countryside—would prove to be the key measurement of allied progress in the war. Given more U.S. resources, McNamara said that the South Vietnamese could build an effective rural development program in about two years. Though the Joint Chiefs of Staff were more upbeat about the military situation than the secretary, they agreed that the allies needed several more years to generate widespread and lasting gains. Seeing no prospect of the situation improving on its

own, President Johnson agreed to send more troops to Vietnam and hand to MACV a larger pacification support role.

A slew of new American units joined MACV during the late summer and autumn of 1966. The 196th Light Infantry Brigade deployed to III Corps in August, followed a month later by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and its fleet of M48 tanks and M113 armored cavalry assault vehicles (ACAVs). In October, the 1st and the 3d Brigades of the 4th Infantry Division debarked in III Corps, with the 1st Brigade soon moving on to its new permanent home in the Central Highlands. Secretary McNamara watched the buildup with growing dismay. He worried that deploying more U.S. combat units would not produce a breakthrough in the war, and that it was in fact destabilizing the South Vietnamese economy. Therefore, he wanted the military leaders in the Pentagon and at U.S. Pacific Command to review the accuracy of their force requirements and to send to Vietnam “only what is needed.” The secretary’s concerns were well founded. The U.S. Embassy in Saigon reported during the summer that inflation was now rampant in South Vietnam, driving up the cost of living. South Vietnam attempted to counter the impact by devaluing its currency, but that step undermined wage stability, contributed to an inflationary gap between projected

Soldiers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment stand next to their M113 ACAV as they perform maintenance on a pair of M60 machine guns.



revenues and budget, nurtured the burgeoning black market, and ignited political unrest in populated areas.

As for pacification, Johnson established a special assistant in the White House to ensure that pacification received sufficient attention from both U.S. military and civilian officials and the South Vietnamese government. He chose Robert W. Komer, a former CIA analyst who had joined the National Security Council staff during the Kennedy administration, for the job.

Komer began his duties in March 1966 and made pacification a matter of personal commitment. He understood Johnson's resolve regarding what the commander in chief called "the other war." Johnson hoped that economic, social, and political reforms akin to his domestic initiative, the Great Society, would persuade the Vietnamese population to turn against the Communists and to support the allied cause actively.

Within a few weeks of beginning his new position, Komer completed and coordinated with the relevant U.S. agencies a presidential directive designed to centralize management of pacification in Washington under his control. This directive, signed by Johnson, granted Komer direct access to the president and substantial authority over not only the civilian agencies responsible for pacification activities—the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Central Intelligence Agency—but also influence in the employment of military resources to fulfill the president's pledge to the South Vietnamese leaders to help build a new South Vietnam.

Komer assumed his role by frequently traveling to South Vietnam to observe the progress of pacification firsthand. When asked by the U.S. press in Saigon what it was like to deal with Komer, Ambassador Lodge likened it to having a "blowtorch aimed at the seat of your pants." Komer's nickname became "Blowtorch Bob" and he reveled in the appellation, as it was indicative not only of his forceful personality, but also of his dedication to the president's priority.

Komer's reports to President Johnson about pacification activities over the next few months were generally positive and optimistic. He was confident that the United States could build an effective nonmilitary effort to complement the military's actions, but the pacification program was lagging significantly behind the combat power the U.S. military had introduced. He recognized that military requirements had priority, but he noted that economic instability in South Vietnam was linked to a number of factors,

including the inefficient distribution of U.S. economic aid to the Vietnamese people. He pointed out, for example, that USAID was competing with the military for port space. It also did not have the transportation assets to deliver American aid—a steady stream of building material, agricultural tools, medicine, and food shipments—to where it was needed in a timely manner. He expressed concern about the weak and apathetic South Vietnamese approach to pacification, the military’s dominant role among the U.S. organizations, and the inability of the civilian agencies to operate at the high tempo the war required. He even swiped at Lodge, calling his leadership of the U.S. pacification effort ineffectual. Yet, he remained confident that the U.S. Embassy would eventually “bring order out of chaos” in the civil side. He pressed the military to assist USAID with its distribution needs by moving supplies into rural areas, a step toward achieving more balance between military and civil efforts.

Komer disparaged the lack of innovative thinking in Saigon and argued that the United States and South Vietnam should develop an integrated approach to pacification that harmonized the war with rural development. To that end, Komer believed that MACV’s emphasis on “search and destroy” missions needed to be refocused to clearing and holding the countryside if the South

Men of the 1st Cavalry Division search a hamlet for signs of Viet Cong activity.



Vietnamese were to regain control of the hamlets now dominated by the Viet Cong.

In August 1966, after completing a comprehensive analysis of pacification activities, Komer concluded that the United States needed to bring all of its pacification-oriented efforts under a single manager structure. He favored MACV as the vehicle for this change, with General Westmoreland given broad supervisory authority over U.S. civilian agencies from the regional to district levels.

Lodge rejected Komer's recommendation, but the proposal gained traction higher up the chain of command. U.S. Pacific Command began highlighting the importance of nation building in its planning. Westmoreland began discussing this element more directly in his strategy, now confident that with the buildup of U.S. forces, he could lend greater assistance to the South Vietnamese Army and to the South Vietnamese Ministry of Revolutionary Development, the agency that managed much of the pacification program. Lodge agreed with the MACV commander's approach. However, given the negative response by civilian agencies to Komer's proposal for placing their field personnel under military control, President Johnson tabled the idea for the time being. He would wait for the right psychological moment to implement it.

BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

Fighting battles and wooing Vietnamese peasants may have grabbed the attention of Americans back home, but none of it was possible without a huge effort behind the scenes. Of particular interest to Westmoreland was the construction of airfields, cantonments, and logistics facilities. While substantial progress had been made in 1965, the colonel who ran the MACV Engineer's office had neither the authority nor the staff necessary to coordinate the vast number of projects. Further, there was no construction plan or established priorities, a critical factor because of the extremely limited construction capability in country. The coordination problem stemmed partly from the pouring in of U.S. forces, equipment, and supplies, and partly on how projects were managed in South Vietnam. Not only was there a need for coordination between the military command and the civilian contractor (a combination of several corporations), but each of the military departments was responsible for different geographic regions or project categories and had its own funding source. Once one of the military departments approved a project, the engineer of

the managing service could lay claim to a portion of the limited resources in country.

By the end of 1965, Westmoreland recognized the need for a more effective staff organization to manage the construction program and to ensure optimal use of resources. In January 1966, the secretary of defense approved the creation of an "engineer construction boss" under Westmoreland. A month later, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Carroll H. Dunn became director of construction, with his directorate part of the MACV J-4 (Logistics) organization.

The reorganization improved the allocation of resources. The construction of support facilities throughout South Vietnam continued at an acceptable pace through 1966. At year's end, the United States had built cantonments for more than 400,000 personnel. It had constructed 9.6 million square meters of warehouses, 34.2 million square meters of open storage, and 5.1 million square meters of ammunition storage. It had also erected 26 hospitals and extensive communications facilities, valued at more than \$27 million, and 280,000 kilowatts of electrical-generating capacity, a major feature given the demand for refrigerated storage to prevent food spoilage in a hot and humid climate.

The other vexing issue besides facilities was the supply system. As would make sense given the rapid buildup, each of the services implemented its own existing system within its area of operations. However, this approach presented problems in inventory and distribution because in many areas joint operations were occurring and some supply items were common to all services. In mid-1965, the Joint Chiefs studied the logistics support for U.S. forces and concluded that the establishment of a common supply system would yield benefits. Based on their recommendation, the secretary of defense tasked the U.S. Army to develop a single supply system for all U.S., South Vietnamese, and Free World forces. The Army prepared a phased implementation plan for identifying and filling requirements that was connected to the Defense Department's budgeting and funding systems so that a "single integrated logistic system" would be in place. The Army recommended that it operate the system for the South Vietnamese and Free World forces in the Republic of Vietnam.

Secretary McNamara approved the initial phase of the plan in February 1966. Shortly thereafter, the Army began operating the common supply system, furnishing support in the categories of subsistence, packaged petroleum products, and select

general housekeeping supplies in all the corps tactical zones except I Corps, where the marines operated.

ANALYSIS

In February 1965, ten years of American advice, assistance, and limited combat support against Communist machinations in South Vietnam seemed to have been for naught, as the country stood on the brink of collapse. With 23,000 military advisers, aviators, communications specialists, and support personnel already in South Vietnam, President Johnson faced a hard choice; he could either fold or double down. If the latter, in what fashion should he up the ante? Loathing war but determined not to be known as the man who lost the Cold War in Southeast Asia, Johnson reluctantly decided to become more deeply involved in the conflict. At first, the administration hoped it could use airpower to persuade North Vietnam to abandon its quest to conquer South Vietnam. When that did not work, it opted to add ground troops to protect the installations that made the air campaign and the rest of the U.S. support effort possible. When this step too seemed unlikely to produce results, the president, without a clear plan, committed the U.S. military to a direct and escalating role in the ground war against Southern insurgents and the government of North Vietnam. Whether the goal was to defeat the enemy or to compel it to accept a compromise settlement depended on whom you asked and when you asked the question, but by October 1966, the “Americanization” of the war was well under way, with 351,372 military personnel—over 60 percent of them members of the U.S. Army—deployed to Vietnam. If the aims of Washington policy-makers remained unclear, the hardships were real for the men and women sent to Vietnam. Place names like Dong Xoai, Dak To, Plei Me, and Ia Drang—unknown to most Americans prior to 1965—were within a few months after the deployment of U.S. ground combat troops forever bloodily etched in the annals of U.S. history. The die of war had been cast.

Prohibited from using ground forces to attack the resources in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that made the enemy’s own escalation possible, General Westmoreland fashioned a military program to fit administration policy. Essentially, he took a twin approach—eroding the enemy’s forces on the one hand while restoring government control over the countryside on the other. He assumed these efforts would be mutually reinforcing, with the

degree of emphasis shifting depending on circumstances. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps, backed by the U.S. Air Force, would bear the primary burden for the first task—that of destroying the enemy’s main combat forces—while the Vietnamese, with U.S. civilian and military advisory assistance, addressed the guerrilla and political threats and the socioeconomic conditions that fueled the insurgent aspect of the war. This formulation had governed America’s approach to the war since 1961, albeit now backed by U.S. ground combat troops, and it would remain largely intact for much of the rest of the conflict.

There was much to be done in 1965, and real-life obstacles, exacerbated by the Johnson administration’s gradualist approach and refusal to mobilize, meant that it would take some time before the allies could effectively prosecute Westmoreland’s three-phased strategy. Nevertheless, by the end of 1965, U.S. troops moving about the country in “fire-brigade” fashion had staunched the most serious bleeding. Actions to parry the enemy’s thrusts, and to launch occasional thrusts of one’s own, continued throughout 1966, as the United States gradually built up not just its forces, but also the logistical and administrative infrastructure needed to support the approximately 385,000 uniformed men and women who by late 1966 stood in harm’s way 8,500 miles from home. Pacification, given the tenuous nature of the situation in 1965 and early 1966, necessarily took a back seat to the military buildup, but it remained central to the allies’ approach to the war, with the White House taking measures to elevate its importance even further.

Thanks to the sacrifices made by America’s soldiers, sailors, marines, and aviators as 1966 drew to a close, General Westmoreland was increasingly in position to launch the type of large, sustained military campaign that he hoped would both cripple the enemy and enable the South Vietnamese to make substantial progress toward pacification. The tide had been stemmed, yet no one was under the illusion that the task ahead would be either easy or quick. Indeed, the events of 1965 and 1966 had shown the enemy to be a dangerous and able foe, unshaken despite heavy losses in his own pursuit of victory. The true struggle had just begun.

The Author

Frank L. Jones holds a Ph.D. in political science from Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, and a master of public administration from the University at Albany, State University of New York. He served as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army from 1973 to 1977. He is a professor of security studies in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. In 2006, he retired from the Department of Defense, where he held a number of positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. These included his appointment as deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations policy and support, and principal director for strategy, plans, and resources in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense. He has authored several articles and book chapters on national security policymaking, homeland security, and terrorism. His most recent work is *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (2013).

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For more information on the U.S. Army in the Vietnam War, please read our other title in the U.S. Army Campaigns of the Vietnam War series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History (www.history.army.mil).



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